

*Routledge Research in Museum Studies*

# MUSEUMS AND THE ANCIENT MIDDLE EAST

**CURATORIAL PRACTICE AND AUDIENCES**

Edited by  
Geoff Emberling and Lucas P. Petit



# Museums and the Ancient Middle East

*Museums and the Ancient Middle East* is the first book to focus on contemporary exhibit practice in museums that present the ancient Middle East. Bringing together the latest thinking from a diverse and international group of leading curators, the book presents the views of those working in one particular community of practice: the art, archaeology, and history of the ancient Middle East.

Drawing upon a remarkable group of case studies from many of the world's leading museums, including the British Museum, the Louvre, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Ashmolean Museum, and the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin, this volume describes the tangible actions curators have taken to present a previously unseen side of the Middle East region and its history. Highlighting overlaps and distinctions between the practices of national, art, and university museums around the globe, the contributors to the volume are also able to offer unique insights into the types of challenges and opportunities facing the twenty-first century curator.

*Museums and the Ancient Middle East* should be of interest to academics and students engaged in the study of museums and heritage, archaeology, the ancient Near East, Middle Eastern studies, and ancient history. The unique insights provided by curators active in the field ensure that the book should also be of great interest to museum practitioners around the globe.

**Geoff Emberling** is Associate Research Scientist at the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan. He has done curatorial work for most of his career, first as Assistant Curator in the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, then as Museum Director and Chief Curator at the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago. He has also developed exhibits as consulting curator at the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, New York University, and most recently at the Detroit Institute of Arts. He is also a field archaeologist who has directed projects in Syria and Sudan.

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# Museums and the Ancient Middle East

Curatorial Practice and Audiences

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Lucas P. Petit

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**Ariane Thomas** is Curator of the Mesopotamian collections in the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Antiquities at the Louvre Museum, where she set up or renewed several installations and display cases. In addition, she teaches Ancient Near Eastern archaeology at the École du Louvre from the first year to PhD level, and she is a member of the UMR 7192 at the Collège de France. She also participates in several archaeological excavations in the Middle East. She was awarded her PhD by the Sorbonne University (Paris IV), France, with a thesis on Ancient Mesopotamian royal costume. Recently, she curated successful exhibitions: “History Begins in Mesopotamia” and “Music and Sounds in Antiquity from Tigris to Tiber.” In addition to many lectures and publications, she develops research programs that combine archaeology, history, epigraphy, and science.

**Annelies Van de Ven** just submitted her PhD thesis in Middle Eastern Archaeology and Museology in the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies at the University of Melbourne, Australia. She has participated in several excavations, most recently at Dhaskalio in Greece and at Ur in Iraq. Alongside her PhD research and fieldwork, she has also worked as tutor, editor, and curatorial assistant within her field. In 2017 she curated her first solo exhibition around the theme of Middle Eastern archaeology, entitled “(Re-)Producing Power.” Her research interests include the historiography of archaeology in the Middle East and museum education.

# Preface

The idea to organize a workshop about curatorial practices in museums with ancient Middle Eastern collections arose in October 2011, when the editors met at the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden. Both were or had been deeply involved in renewing the permanent ancient Middle Eastern galleries of their particular museums and were somewhat disillusioned by the rare information exchange among curators and with other scholars. It became clear that almost all colleagues are struggling with the same seemingly impossible task: to exhibit in a restricted space and with a restricted number of objects an immense area and an equally long history to a wider public. The number of cultures is endless, the social developments of regions are varied, and the material culture differs more than in any other area on Earth. Nevertheless, it is expected by museum directors, policy makers, the media, and the public that curators present a simple package that can be understood and enjoyed in an hour or so. We decided on that cold morning in October that it was time to direct attention to curatorial opportunities and tensions in museums with ancient Middle Eastern collections.

Most chapters in this volume were presented as papers at two workshops, one at the 9th International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East (ICAANE) in Basel (June 10–11, 2014)<sup>1</sup> and the second at the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR) meeting in Atlanta (November 21, 2015).<sup>2</sup> This book is, however, not simply a volume of conference proceedings. All papers have been significantly developed and revised since they were presented at the workshops, not least as a result of fascinating discussions during and after these two meetings.

We hope that the diversity of perspectives of curators of art museums, national museums, and university museums and their colleagues from all over the world will stimulate more discussion, which we think will be beneficial for present and future curators, for the academic community, and perhaps even for museum visitors.

We would like to thank Routledge for their many helpful suggestions and for preparing this volume for publication. We owe a substantial debt to the organizers of the 9th ICAANE conference and the ASOR Annual meeting for housing the workshops, and the Antikenmuseum Basel for organizing a reception and dinner. We are especially grateful to all participants of the workshops and authors for making this volume possible.

*The editors*

## **Notes**

- 1 At the workshop in Basel, papers by Joan Aruz and Yelena Rakic, Pedro Azara and Marc Marín, Leila Badre, Irving Finkel, Jack Green, Lucas P. Petit, Holly Pittman, Clemens Reichel, and Yaniv Schauer were presented.
- 2 At the ASOR Annual Meeting in Atlanta, papers by Swarupa Anila and Geoff Emberling, Jack Green, Pedro Azara and Marc Marín, Paul Collins, Haim Gitler, Andrew Jamieson and Annelies Van de Ven, Peter Lacovara, Lutz Martin, Clemens Reichel, and Ariane Thomas were presented.

Part I

# Introductory





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# 1 Curating the ancient Middle East<sup>1</sup>

*Geoff Emberling and Lucas P. Petit*

## **The ancient Middle East and museums**

The ancient Middle East is a rich source of history and heritage for much of the world. Collectively, the ancient cultures of Mesopotamia in what is now Iraq (Sumer, Babylonia, Assyria), Persia to the east, the “lands of the Bible” to the west, Anatolia (the Hittites) to the north, and many others have come to define Western ideas about the “rise of civilization” (e.g., Breasted 1916)—this is true even if we somewhat arbitrarily exclude ancient Egypt. It is also true if we stop the clock with the arrival of Alexander the Great in the region in 331 BCE, as archaeological narratives often do.

Heritage connections to these ancient cultures are maintained today in some national and ethnic contexts in the Middle East (Iran’s connection to ancient Persia, for example, or the modern Assyrian community’s connection to the Assyrian Empire) and in religious traditions. These connections are not universally claimed or maintained in the Middle East, however. But a claim on the heritage of the region is now ubiquitous in the West.

Among the many ways that knowledge about and memory of these cultures is preserved and presented to broad audiences is in museums in Europe and North America, as well as in the Middle East itself. Museums have developed relatively recently in western societies, with the rise of royal collections and cabinets of curiosities in 16th-century Europe (Impey and MacGregor 1985) and museums like the Louvre and the British Museum that became symbols of imperial identity in the centuries following. In an echo of these museums of empire, Ottoman Turkey established its own museum of ancient Middle Eastern cultures in Constantinople during the late 19th century (Shaw 2003; Bahrani et al. 2011).

Yet the preservation and display of material remains of the past have a much longer history in the societies of the ancient Middle East (Emberling and Hanson in press) and elsewhere (Kreps 2006), even older than the *Musaeum* in Alexandria as described by the ancient writer Strabo:

The Museum is also a part of the royal palaces; it has a public walk, and Exedra with seats, and a large house, in which is the common mess-hall of

the men of learning who share the Museum. This group of men not only hold property in common, but also have a priest in charge of the Museum, who formerly was appointed by the kings, but is now appointed by Caesar.

(Strabo, *Geogr.* 17.1.8 [translated by Jones 1932])

Elamite kings in southwestern Iran raided the cities of Mesopotamia in the 14th century BCE, captured monuments, and brought them back and displayed them in their capital at Susa (Thomason 2005).<sup>2</sup> The Babylonian emperor Nabonidus (6th century BCE) recovered artifacts found in renovations of temples and displayed them in the Temple of Shamash, the god of Justice, in the city of Sippar (Garrison 2012). During the Assyrian Empire, a massive cast copper head of an Akkadian king that was by then over 1,000 years old was set up in the temple of the goddess Ishtar in Nineveh (Mallowan 1936). And a king of the 2nd century BCE recovered diorite statues of the Sumerian King Gudea of Lagash (21st century BCE) and set them up in his palace in southern Mesopotamia (Suter 2012:69). These ancient displays, established and set up (as we would say, curated) by the kings themselves, made varied claims on the past and on their audiences. Some were propagandistic displays of royal power; others assertion of heritage connection with the kings, scribes, and artisans of the past.

Museums of these ancient cultures today establish different publics (Braae 2001), or audiences, and present more varied connections with the distant past. Museums attract large numbers of visitors and provide richly illustrated and authoritative accounts of topics of public interest. They are places to visit and even learn with friends and family (Falk and Dierking 2000), as well as places to stimulate interest and social dialogue. The stories they tell reveal as much about contemporary interests and concerns as they do about their ostensible subjects (e.g., Vergo 1989).

In part for that reason, museums are also increasingly the subject of critical scholarly interest—they have become “good to think” (Lévi-Strauss 1963:89). Most of the writing on museum exhibition practice has been done either by experts in museum education and exhibition, in visitor research and evaluation, or by scholars of museums (among many others: Bennett 1995; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006), rather than by curators, who have traditionally “functioned as arbiters of taste and quality” (Ramirez 1999:22). They have been the advocates who decide what was most interesting and valuable to present to the public (e.g., Davis 2007:57).

Yet the role of curators is under reconsideration, as many museums move towards greater emphasis on collaborative exhibit development that emphasizes social engagement and learning, as well as marketing and museum finances (e.g., Haas 2003; Shelton 2006:76; Schorch 2017). It is an interesting and important moment for curators to reflect on our practice: What are we trying to achieve? Where have we found success? How have audiences responded to our contributions? To what extent can we say that we have moved our museums from being “about something” to being “for somebody,” as Stephen Weil (1999) asked (see now Silverman 2015)?

### A community of curators and colleagues<sup>3</sup>

In some sense the focus in this volume on curatorial practice in museums of the ancient Middle East is arbitrary. Curators working on other times, places, and media certainly have many of the same challenges and opportunities (see, e.g., Obrist 2014). However, curators who work with collections of art and artifacts from the ancient Middle East form a “community of practice” (Wenger 1998).<sup>4</sup> This resonant phrase and analytical perspective comes from theories about learning, and it proposes that we define values and knowledge relating to them through our participation in social networks. Wenger (1998:5) suggests four key terms that define social learning:

- 1 Meaning: a way of talking about our (changing) ability, individually and collectively, to experience our life and the world as meaningful.
- 2 Practice: a way of talking about the shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action.
- 3 Community: a way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognizable as competence.
- 4 Identity: a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities.

Curators are members of a range of different social networks—we are scholars (archaeologists, art historians, historians) who engage with scholars in a range of other institutions and disciplines; we are specialists with connections to curators working in other museums and other fields; and we are museum professionals who work with other museum disciplines ranging from exhibition, interpretation, and education, to conservation and development.

Curators working on the ancient Middle East are frequently in contact with other Middle East curators. We may see the exhibits that others have done, informally discuss the opportunities and challenges in our work, arrange loans, and we stay in touch.

However, curators working on ancient Middle East collections as a group rarely discuss or write about curatorial practice. By contrast, discussions of theory and method in archaeology, art history, and philology are common (and understood as necessary in those disciplines)—the contrast is stark. This volume represents one of the first efforts to engage this community in broader discussion.<sup>5</sup> With contributions from 20 authors working in nine different countries and working in national museums and university museums, museums of art and museums of archaeology, the essays in this book serve as a snapshot of the field in 2018, of how we curators think about our work and how we engage with other related communities of practice.

### *Who are curators in this community, and what do they do?*

Many if not most of us currently doing curatorial work did not begin our academic training expecting to work in museums. Perhaps this will change with the

recent growth of museum studies programs and the arrival of a new generation of museum curators who are versed in analytical literature about museums as well as knowledge of archaeology, art, and history of the region.

Curators are closely connected with our collections and with our institutions, as the essays in this volume show. We know the objects and have a sense of their interpretive possibilities as well as their limitations and challenges (like authenticity, for example). As a consequence, we usually take the perspective of our museums, whether we are telling a story about art or archaeology, for example, or whether our audience is a broad public or a narrower group like a university community.

Curators are also engaged with research—archaeological fieldwork and art historical analysis (Azara and Marín “Miro,” this volume) that may or may not be closely related to collections in our museums. We also carry out research on the collections themselves. Active research allows us to find and convey the resonant stories that the objects and collections can present, which may change with current events and interests.

Curators care deeply about the physical space of exhibits and the way that space engages our idealized exhibit narratives, but work as part of larger teams to install exhibits.

Finally, curators have an interest in audience response to our work, although as this volume shows, our engagement with audiences varies widely.

The Middle East has been very much in the news in recent years, and many recent events have directly affected antiquities, including the extensive looting of sites in Iraq and the looting of the Iraq Museum (see, among others, Emberling and Hanson eds. 2008), and the deliberate destruction of ancient and more recent monuments and museums in Syria and northern Iraq by ISIS (e.g., De Cesari 2015; Casana 2015).<sup>6</sup> Public interest turns to the ancient history of the Middle East by these devastating events. We curators have opportunities to provide context to show other sides of the region and its history.

How we collectively have tried to do that is shown in part by the essays presented here, which we intend to represent the beginning of conversations surrounding curatorial practice. We have in some cases continued various well-established traditions of story-telling and display in our community. We often fall back on the role of the region in the “rise of civilization” (see critique by Petit, this volume). We tell stories of important sites like Babylon or distinctive ancient cultures like the Phoenicians (Badre, this volume) or the ancient cultures of an entire country, like Jordan (Alamri and Kafafi, this volume). We find new ways to make connections to what museum visitors bring to our exhibits, now that knowledge of the Bible, for example, can no longer be taken for granted (as our British colleagues have reminded us: see chapters by Collins and by Finkel and Fletcher, this volume). We have connected the ancient world to modern phenomena like globalization (as a series of exhibits at The Metropolitan Museum have done; see Aruz and Rakic, this volume). And some are engaging with audiences in ways that are new to us (even if they are increasingly widespread in the museum field more broadly). These developments are visible in

national museums like the Louvre and the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin (Thomas, this volume; Martin, this volume), in art museums like the Detroit Institute of Arts (Anila and Emberling, this volume), and in university museums like the Ian Potter Museum of Art at the University of Melbourne (Van de Ven and Jamieson, this volume).

## **Museums of the ancient Middle East**

The volume is divided into sections that group papers on national museums, art museums, and university museums, and thus proposes that there are similarities among those groups in terms of how they understand their mission, their audience, and curatorial practice.

National museums can be called national because they receive funding as a matter of national policy and thus display archaeology and history in ways that reflect, or more fundamentally construct, national values (Bennett 1988). In the case of European museums, these values were initially better characterized as imperial values, as during the 19th century European museums began amassing collections as a result of control over their colonies in the Middle East (and elsewhere). These are, as a result, museums that tend to have the most spectacular objects and the largest and most comprehensive collections in European countries, and also the largest audiences. For historical reasons, museums in North America had their origins less in national priorities than in groups of newly wealthy patrons in the later 19th century. And clearly national museums in the Middle East itself, where most countries were formed only in the 20th century, have their own trajectory, if a similar commitment to a national narrative. While the national museums represented in this volume define their scope somewhat differently, none of them would consider themselves to be focused exclusively on art.

Art museums, on the other hand, present ancient objects as art (see discussion by Azara and Marín “White Cube,” this volume)—which means among other things that they are committed to focusing visitors’ attention on visual examination of the objects themselves rather than on historical narratives or on contextual aspects of the collection (Bennett 1988). In this perspective, photos, maps, and other material are kept to a minimum to avoid distraction from the art itself.

Discussion about the role of art museums started early. According to John Cotton Dana (1917), they should be institutes of visual instruction. The secretary of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in the 1920s, Benjamin Ives Gilman, proposed that they should cultivate an appreciation of beauty (McClellan 2003). However, the idea of being an “elite temple of the arts”—in contrast to national museums—is now being challenged in museums (Trask 2011:86).

By contrast, university museums are founded for research and teaching within universities and often the university community may be the most important audience (but see Badre, this volume). Collections were often acquired during archaeological fieldwork and brought together in order to widen the understanding of

students. One of the earliest is the Ashmolean Museum at the University of Oxford (Collins, this volume). Curators in these museums are frequently also university faculty members, and their specific task is to care for the collection and use it for education and learning. “Hands-on” is an often-heard term at university museums (Van de Ven and Jamieson, this volume), and this practice can be difficult to achieve in other museum settings. It can be argued that the difference between university museums and national museums is fading, as audiences at both museums consider a visit mostly a leisure activity, rather than a learning experience. Only the university museums that are supported by the academic community and that engage in their curatorial (and museological) work will probably survive as university museums (e.g., Van de Ven and Jamieson, this volume). University museums of the ancient Middle East are usually not art-focused; they can address topics that are not commercially attractive and may focus on archaeological narratives rather than objects (Green, this volume; Pittman, this volume).

Museums as a group have a less widely acknowledged role—an increasingly important one, we would argue—in generating support (both in terms of general interest and funding) for studies of the ancient Middle East, as Shanks and Tilley (1987:68ff.) wrote about archaeological museums generally. Some of the older justifications for archaeological and philological research seem perhaps less compelling these days—anthropology as social scientific endeavor explaining cross-cultural regularities in social, political, and economic change, for example; and certainly it has become more difficult to justify teaching esoteric dead languages in small classes in many universities. So the increasing interest in museums as guardians of cultural heritage and as places to visit and work—and also as places to study and sets of practices to analyze—suggests that museums are important in showing that our field retains its relevance and interest, and that funding for fieldwork, text-based research, and exhibits provides significant benefits to the general public (Collins, this volume). One could make similar arguments for museums that focus on Egyptian art, or archaeological and anthropological collections more broadly (Barker 2010).

### **Curatorial tensions**

“Community” is a term that is notoriously vague and one that can suggest a lack of tension among its members. However, there is a range of tensions that structures and constrains curatorial practices—and these tensions exist despite a nearly complete absence of formal discussion about them among ancient Middle East curators and scholars. The lack of conversation itself is an impediment to greater success for ancient Middle East exhibits.

One set of tensions exists between museums and universities, even when museums are a part of universities. From the point of view of many university researchers, museum curators tend to be empiricist in their work—what is often called “object-oriented”—and their written work tends not to engage broader questions or theoretical perspectives that are an essential part of work in at

least some academic fields (anthropology or art history, for example). And for university researchers, work in museums is often categorized as “service” rather than “research,” even though writing wall panels, labels, and catalogs certainly represent production and dissemination of knowledge, as the former director of the Penn Museum Jeremy Sabloff (2011) has written. Despite the large numbers of museum visitors who encounter the ancient Middle East through museum displays (as evidenced by the attendance figures given in the chapters in this volume), university researchers tend to downplay the importance of this exposure—for example, a recent statement by a university scholar of the importance of “outreach” for the continuing viability of archaeological and historical research (Alcock 2016) did not mention museums at all.<sup>7</sup>

From the point of view of museum curators, academic researchers can appear to be pragmatically challenged as far as meeting deadlines and working as part of the teams required to put together museum exhibits, and can generally be fearful of making direct, unqualified statements that will be read by thousands of museum visitors.

It is clear, however, that both curators and faculty researchers are scholars, and both can play valuable roles in research and in generation and dissemination of knowledge for specialists as well as public presentation of their research.

Another significant tension in exhibition is that between philosophies of display at art museums and archaeology museums—are we displaying art or artifacts (e.g., Center for African Art 1988)? As noted above, archaeologist curators tend to have instincts to contextualize objects through maps, graphics, and text, which conflicts directly with the art museum idea that objects should be understood primarily for their aesthetic properties and thus should be displayed with a minimum of visual distraction.

Finally, we would note the tensions over changing roles for curators in exhibit development (Anila and Emberling, this volume). Traditionally, curators were the only voice in planning exhibits, selecting objects and themes, and writing text. But increasingly this role has changed, with museum educators, exhibit designers, and focus groups and public opinion in some museums taking an increasingly prominent role in a collaborative process. Curators often don’t support changes made in this direction, but when done in balance, the broader approach can make exhibits dramatically more effective.

## **The future of curatorial practice**

It is thus a challenging and interesting time to be a curator of ancient Middle Eastern collections. A recent summary statement proposed that

The museum curatorial profession in the United States is in peril. At best it has stagnated in the face of radical economic, social and technological changes. At worst it is increasingly considered irrelevant vis-à-vis post-structuralist attitudes towards the devaluation of expertise, democratization of the institution, an over-emphasis on education programs to take advantage of



funding opportunities instead of the educational nature of the entire institution, and the US penchant for reliance on populism and statistics.

(Hoffman et al. 2015:117)

Similar statements could be made about curators in other countries. As a general rule, museums have failed to recognize the curatorial role as a continuing contributing factor to museum success. We would argue that curators need to support the idea that, to remain relevant, museums should be spaces for dialogue and discussions for communities, rather than simply places to present art, history, and archaeology.

Given the essentially colonial origin of museums of the ancient Middle East in Europe and North America, it is striking that none of the papers in the volume (including those of the editors) engage with what might be called “de-colonizing” curatorial practice. In the Code of Ethics of the International Council of Museums, museums are called upon to collaborate with the countries of origin. But, apart from a few cases, international curatorial collaboration remains rare (and can be paternalistic when it occurs). It is not a simple matter to consider how to reframe international curatorial relations, but surely this is an opportunity for the near future. A start would be to organize curatorial discussions with Middle Eastern museums (this volume is a first attempt). It would certainly help if museums and curators promoted a more open world-view in presentations and concepts, including a more transparent attitude towards the pedigrees of objects (Petit, this volume) and more collaborations with Middle Eastern partners (see essays in Silverman ed. 2015 for some recent examples working in Africa). Middle Eastern traditions deserve recognition and preservation in their own right (Kreps 2008:25).

The reader will notice that the number of papers in this volume from museums in the Middle East itself is rather limited (only Jordan and Lebanon). Considering our proposition of more collaboration, this is unfortunate. The editors have worked to persuade colleagues from Turkey, Iran, and Israel to give their views on curatorial practices in those countries, and we would also have liked to include curators from other Middle Eastern countries. Some of the obstacles are that our professional networks do not in all cases extend to curators in the Middle East and that some curators in the Middle East view their role (and are viewed by their institutions) in ways different from the curators writing in this volume. In some cases, they may not be empowered by their education, training, or position to write analytically about their own institutions.

In the future, curators will increasingly have to think about our communities and about our audiences (Paddon 2016:67–8). The relationship between curators and visitors differs enormously: mentor to student, authority versus active participant, or as peers (Walhimer 2015:4). Curators might increasingly discuss how certain topics should be addressed, but many curators would argue that there must be a limit to the extent the public can influence museum content (e.g., Barrett 2012).

## Editorial notes

As a final note, we would like to clarify some of the general editorial decisions we have made for this volume.

While we are extremely pleased with the range of curators and museums that responded positively to our invitation to write for this volume, we are also conscious of the many omissions—none is intended to be definitive or final. As noted above, we hope that this volume will be the beginning of conversations, not the end.

We asked all authors to discuss the history of their institution and its collection as related to the ancient Middle East. This has produced a set of generally comparable figures on size of collection and attendance, for example, but it also generated a great deal of enthusiastic writing—a sign of curators' engagement with the history of our institutions and collections.

Finally, we have imposed two editorial standardizations. Where possible, we use the term “ancient Middle East” rather than “ancient Near East,” which is the standard term in scholarship on the region (and also in the titles of many departments, galleries, exhibits, and publications). We did this to reconnect these ancient cultures with the land in which they are now situated, which in general parlance is now called the Middle East. This change of terminology can be surprisingly disorienting to scholars but we trust they will know the region we are discussing. Finally, in a nod to inclusiveness, we have adopted BCE and CE as designations of dates.

## Notes

- 1 This introductory chapter has a long genesis. Emberling introduced conference sessions at the American Schools of Oriental Research Annual Meeting (2011, San Francisco) and the International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East (2014, Basel), and some of those remarks have informed our writing here. The conferences on which this volume are based (ICAANE 2014 and ASOR 2015, Atlanta) provided ample opportunities for discussion, as has the long process of writing chapters and editing the volume itself. And naturally our own personal experiences in museums have informed almost every word. Thanks to volume authors and especially to Raymond Silverman for helpful suggestions on this chapter.
- 2 These monuments, including the Stele of Hammurabi and the Stele of Naram-Sin, were excavated by French archaeologists working at Susa and brought back to the Louvre in the early 20th century.
- 3 While most of the authors in this volume are practicing curators, others have participated in engaging audiences through collections and exhibits under other job titles.
- 4 Introduced to discussions of Middle Eastern archaeology, as far as we are aware, by Starzmann (2013).
- 5 It follows a smaller-scale effort that brought together some of the largest museums in the United States, UK, France, and Germany that have ancient Middle Eastern collections (Salje 2001).
- 6 The issues of heritage preservation (e.g., Al Quntar et al. 2015) and the ethics of collecting (e.g., Robson et al. 2006) are extremely important ones for curators and all scholars working on the ancient Middle East, but they have also dominated discussion

of museums in our area, so we have set them aside for the purposes of discussing the essential interpretive work of curators here.

- 7 Oddly, the developing field of community archaeology seems largely to ignore the potential contribution of museum practice to addressing broad public audiences (e.g., Okamura and Matsuda 2011).

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## 2 Museum displays and the creation of the ancient Middle East

A view from the Ashmolean  
and the British Museum

*Paul Collins*

### Introduction

The ancient Middle East can appear to many people as a mysterious “Orient” that encompasses not only a vast span of time but also an enormous geographical region containing an impenetrable mosaic of diverse peoples, languages, and cultures. If this is the perception of most museum visitors, it would be a significant finding as the modern Western encounter with the ancient Middle East (for both specialists and non-specialists alike) has been mediated largely by museums; it is now recognized that their displays and exhibitions have an important role in the formation of disciplinary knowledge, constructing meaning, and defining cultures through the arrangement and presentation of objects (Kaplan 1995; Karp and Lavine 1991; Moser 2003, 2006, 2010). Here I explore briefly how the notion of an “ancient Middle East” was established and perpetuated through museum displays and offer one approach, based at the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, by which it could be made more accessible to audiences that have long expanded beyond those with a Classical education or knowledge of the Hebrew Bible. I have chosen to focus the first part of this paper largely, though not exclusively, on the British Museum because of its significant ancient Middle East collections, but also for its long institutional history that reflects changing approaches to display and interpretation.

### Establishing an ancient Middle East (1840–1940)

The collecting and display practices of the first public collections of antiquities were shaped by conceptual hierarchies that developed within scholarship during the 18th century and out of which were to emerge the disciplines of archaeology and art history. These promoted a chronological sequence that serialized the artistic progress of civilization leading from the accomplishments of ancient Egypt to the idealized humanism of ancient Greece (Jenkins 1992). Within this hierarchical and compartmentalized approach to the ancient world, the Middle East, described as a rather nebulous “Orient,” was defined by an understanding that it was the birthplace of civilization, its shared use of cuneiform, and its political unification in antiquity by absolute monarchs that were antagonistic to Greece as the source of modern democracy (see, for example, Scheffler 2003;

Bahrani 1998). Museums would organize their collections accordingly, both in terms of display but also as administrative departments.

The first significant material from the ancient Middle East to enter the British Museum derived from the excavations of Austen Henry Layard at the Assyrian capital cities of Nimrud and Nineveh from 1845 to 1851. As Frederick Bohrer (2003) has detailed, initially there was little admiration among connoisseurs for Assyrian achievements, despite the public's enthusiasm for the finds. The carved imagery, however, did come to be viewed as "the connecting link between Egyptian and the Persian art, the latter being the forerunner of the Lycian and Grecian art" (Mansell and Co. 1872:xxiii). In this respect, the layout of the sculpture galleries in the British Museum created a fortuitous arrangement with the Assyrian reliefs dividing physically the Egyptian gallery from those of Greece. The 1856 printed guide to the entire collections, the *Synopsis of the Contents of the British Museum*, stresses a broad arrangement that led a visitor backwards through time from Rome, through Greece, to Assyria and Egypt. The *Synopsis* and later official guidebooks were essential for visitors to the Museum if they wished to understand something of its contents as within the galleries there were very few labels since these were handwritten or painted, the work of a skilled letterer, and thus slow and expensive to produce. These early displays included all objects, integrating the Assyrian wall reliefs and small-scale, portable works without privileging either; the latter were displayed in table and wall cases organized by site and material. Originally managed by an all-encompassing Department of Antiquities, the growth of the Mesopotamian collections resulted in the formation of a Department of Oriental Antiquities in 1860 and this was divided subsequently in 1886 into the Department of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities and the Department of British and Medieval Antiquities and Ethnography. Such administrative/academic divisions of the collections were also found at the Louvre Museum, Paris, where a Department of Oriental Antiquities was established in 1881, while a Middle East (*Vorderasiatisches*) section was formed in Berlin's royal museum in 1899.

The transfer of the British Museum's natural history collections to new premises between 1881 and 1883 created additional exhibition space, and some of the small-scale ancient Middle Eastern material was moved upstairs into a so-called Assyrian Room (British Museum 1884:120–24). By 1892 a Babylonian and Assyrian Room contained "antiquities from Babylonia and the miscellaneous smaller antiquities from Assyria, including many objects of the later periods of Persian, Greek, Parthian, Roman, and Sasanian domination. ... The arrangement of antiquities is, as far as possible, both national and chronological" (British Museum 1892:129). The new gallery resulted in the separation of much of the Assyrian portable objects from the relief sculptures on the lower floors (Figure 2.1). A few table cases were, however, left in the ground floor galleries to display small-scale objects that were considered especially important, essentially those demonstrating historical connections as well as literature and science: the Nimroud Room contained table cases with bronze bowls and carved ivories, while the Kouyunjik Room displayed "the most valuable and interesting [cuneiform] tablets" (British Museum 1892:87).





Figure 2.1 Glass lantern slide showing the Nimroud Gallery at the British Museum, about 1880 to 1914

Courtesy of Jonathan Taylor

The establishment of mandate territories in the Levant, Syria, and Iraq following the First World War resulted in international excavations being established throughout these regions and, with them, the rapid growth of Middle Eastern collections in European and North American museums based on the practice of a division of the finds between the host country and the sponsoring institutions. In the British Museum, separate Babylonian and Assyrian rooms became necessary to accommodate material arriving from archaeological work, and from 1925 onwards there were regular temporary exhibitions devoted to the latest finds that had entered the collection from sites like Eridu, Ubaid, Ur, Nineveh, and Arpachiyah (Bowring 2012:9–12). In the same period, significant Middle Eastern collections began to be established in other museums. At the Ashmolean Museum, a West Asiatic Section of the Antiquities Department, first mentioned in the annual report as early as 1912, expanded considerably with a joint Oxford University–Field Museum expedition to Kish in Iraq between 1923 and 1933. In the United States, the Oriental Institute Museum of the University of Chicago was founded in 1919 and opened in 1931, and at The Metropolitan Museum, a Near Eastern Art Department (encompassing both ancient and Islamic) was established in 1932. The opportunity to display material from the eastern half of the Middle East came in 1930 with the opening of Iran to British and North American archaeologists (ending the French monopoly). In 1931 major exhibitions on Persian art (pre-Islamic and Islamic) were held in London at the British Museum and Burlington House (home to the Royal Academy of Arts). Their public and critical success resulted in a Persian Room being opened later that year on the upper floor of the British Museum (Simpson 2013:71).



### **An ancient Middle East of “peoples” and connections (1945–85)**

Following the end of the Second World War, during which the exhibition galleries of the British Museum had been largely cleared, objects were gradually returned to display. There was now, however, a strong desire to make the collections more accessible with the recognition of the needs of both specialists and non-specialists. Sir John Forsdyke, the Museum’s Director (1936–50), considered the issue when delivering a lecture in 1949 on the role of national museums:

Unless the bulk of the material is visible, it is difficult for the specialist to find what he wants or to make new discoveries; but the person who has no special purpose or knowledge is bewildered by the mass of such material. It was recognised long since that exhibition in large museums must not be indiscriminate, but the process of discrimination has not been defined in practical terms. ... At the one end, a rigorous selection of the most attractive or significant documents should be displayed together in an easily accessible gallery for the enjoyment or instruction of visitors with general interests or with limited time. At the other end, a selection of the least obviously attractive or significant objects should be withdrawn to store or workrooms for use by specialists.

(Forsdyke 1949:5)

In the dire financial climate faced by post-war Britain, the opportunity to reorganize the ancient Middle Eastern displays in the museum was not taken and the material was put back into the galleries exactly as it was before the war (Figure 2.2). The collection therefore remained divided between the Assyrian reliefs on the lower floors and the densely displayed upper floor galleries, themselves divided between texts (a Semitic Inscription Room) and geographical-cultural regions: a Hittite Landing, and rooms devoted to Syria, Iran, Assyria, and Babylonia (British Museum 1952). There was no challenge to the existing grouping of material, which was broadly similar to the approach taken in Henri Frankfort’s *Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*, first published in 1954. This was the first attempt to categorize ancient Middle Eastern art over time and across the entire region. With a focus on architecture and sculpture, Frankfort used a historical-cultural subdivision of Western Asia in which Mesopotamia lay at the center with a series of peripheries identified by their constituent “peoples.” Frankfort was also interested in aesthetic and technical comparisons between the art of the Middle East and that of Greece and Rome. Such concerns were shared at the British Museum by Richard Barnett, who was appointed Keeper of a newly established Western Asiatic Antiquities Department in 1955 (with the creation of a separate Department of Egyptian Antiquities under its own Keeper). He had published extensively on the Nimrud ivories as well as about relations between the art of the ancient Middle East and that of Greece and, although the Mesopotamian collections continued to be emphasized, Barnett “sought to redress the balance and give more prominence to surrounding regions such as



Figure 2.2 Display of pottery, glazed wall plaques, and tiles in the Assyrian Room, British Museum (photograph approximately 1945–55)

Middle East Department Archives, courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum

Iran, Anatolia and Palestine” (Curtis 2001:43). Thus, much of the ancient world as understood as belonging within an “ancient Middle East” came to be represented in the museum by physical objects. In so doing the density of the displays was much reduced with the bulk of the collection made available for specialist study via a Departmental Students’ Room.

### **Dismantling the borders of the ancient Middle East (1985–2015)**

Critiques of Orientalism and the emergence of world-systems analysis over the last 35 years has resulted in a breakdown in old polarities between “Oriental” and “Greek” artistic production and the emergence of the “present-day recognition of a historical framework of multiple circulation, or perhaps better of continuous interaction [within and beyond the ancient Middle East, that is,] a vast number of contemporaneous and mutually interrelated artistic developments”

(Fales 2009:242–3). In addition, there has been a move away from a linguistic paradigm in which text is privileged over image, to a materiality of visual culture. Significantly, this same period also saw major transformations in the role of museums within society that were rooted in a century-long “movement of dismantling the museum as an ivory tower of exclusivity ... toward the construction of a more socially responsive cultural institution in service to the public” (Anderson 2004:1). By the 1990s a shift in the primary function of museums was becoming apparent; they were no longer viewed solely as collectors but rather as educators, places where people gathered for debate. At the heart of these changes is a desire, and, for institutions supported by public money, a requirement, for museums to be relevant. The museum’s role has become “a delicate balancing act – responding to the public’s needs while simultaneously challenging them with new ideas and interpretations” (Anderson 2004:5).

In the face of these developments, many museums began to address the question of how to more effectively present their collections to the public. At the British Museum this was made possible for the ancient Middle East by sponsorship from Raymond and Beverley Sackler. Four new galleries, organized by geographical region and period, were installed on the upper floor of the museum: Early Mesopotamia (1991); Later Mesopotamia and Ancient Anatolia (1993); Ancient Levant (1998). This resulted in the dismantling of older divisions in the collections so that the Room of Writing devoted to ancient scripts was de-installed and a selection of the objects incorporated into the new galleries. Small-scale objects were displayed together based on their provenance and material, with contextualization provided through labels and graphic panels with maps and images. The density of display was much reduced and visitors were encouraged to engage with objects and key messages via a range of display strategies such as the use of pattern and symmetry, the juxtaposition of different types of objects, and the singling out of particular items. Compared with earlier displays the galleries were representative rather than comprehensive.

The Department of Western Asiatic Antiquities was renamed in 2000 as the Department of Ancient Near East with the aim of making it more meaningful to a modern audience and to bring it in line with institutions beyond the UK with a similar division of their collections. Six years later, the museum’s Islamic and Middle Eastern ethnographic objects were transferred into the care of the Department that was renamed as “Middle East” in an attempt to express its wider remit. There were also opportunities for different approaches to the presentation of both objects and information, including a return to displaying together objects of different scales; in the Rahim Irvani Gallery of Ancient Iran, for example, which opened on the upper floor of the Museum in 2007, historical casts of reliefs from Persepolis were integrated into a multi-layered display using small-scale objects (Simpson 2007:13). This same approach was followed in 2015 with a refurbishment of the Raymond and Beverly Sackler Gallery of Mesopotamia 1500–539 BCE with the introduction into the displays of a large relief panel from Nineveh (see chapter by Finkel and Fletcher, this volume).

Although current floor plans produced by the British Museum for its visitors use a color code to group the galleries by geographical region/administrative department (purple for Middle East), in other forms of information there have been moves to break down the cultural and geographical borders that have defined the ancient Middle East. Multimedia guides, as well as some of the more traditional text panels and labels, provide links to related objects across the Museum's collections. Objects that suggest intercultural contacts and historical connections have also been displayed beyond their traditional galleries, so that, for example, Phoenician and Syrian-style carved ivories were, until recently, exhibited not only in the Ancient Levant gallery (and so situated within the cultures that created them) but also in the Later Mesopotamia gallery (to illustrate their role in Assyria as tribute and booty, but also their possible impact on local artistic traditions). Such attempts within the Museum's galleries to better reflect a framework of continuous interaction in the production of objects is now also found online. At the time of writing, several hundred of the most famous ancient Middle Eastern objects (across all media) can be explored thematically and within a global context via the Google Cultural Institute. The Museum's own website offers a collection database that provides access to information to over 3.5 million objects (including hundreds of thousands from the ancient Middle East) that are searchable across the entire collections, thereby effectively dissolving geographical and temporal boundaries.

### **Looking to the future**

The external borders and internal cultural boundaries of an ancient Middle East have also begun to be challenged in other museums. This is especially true for temporary exhibitions (see for example Aruz et al. 2003, 2008, 2014; see also chapter by Aruz and Rakic, this volume). It has, however, proven much more difficult to shake off 19th-century divisions for permanent displays. This may be rooted in the traditional administrative partition of collections as well as by the recruitment of curators from institutions that have, at least until recently, taught in the same compartmentalized way as museum departments. Thus, for example, a major redevelopment of the Ashmolean Museum that opened in 2009 provided a unique opportunity to redisplay much of the collections using modern techniques. The concept of "crossing cultures, crossing time" was adopted that was intended to bridge divisions between the five curatorial departments: Antiquities, Eastern Art, the Heberden Coin Room, the Cast Gallery, and Western Art (Walker 2013). The ground floor of the Ashmolean is now devoted to the Ancient World. Galleries are arranged geographically so that a visitor can travel from Japan and China on one side of the building through the Middle East to the Mediterranean and on to Europe or Egypt and Sudan or vice versa. Within this arrangement lies a single Ancient Near East gallery devoted to a period approximately 10,000–323 BCE that encompasses the traditional geographical region reaching from eastern Iran to western Anatolia and the border with Egypt (Gilmour 2011). Connections and influences beyond the ancient Middle East are suggested by a display case built through a wall that links the Ancient Near

East gallery with that of the Aegean World (thus continuing a long-established scholarly interest with interactions between the ancient Middle East and the Mediterranean world).

How then are curators and museum educators to deal with the complexity of the region that they have inherited? Museums that have ancient Middle East collections consisting of thousands of objects face many of the same issues with display as those with only a few objects: how to make them both meaningful and relevant. Modern display strategies are known to be effective tools in creating knowledge—creating new object worlds—but how is this to be achieved? There is increasingly a move towards designing permanent galleries “around a manageable number of key objects carefully chosen to helpfully focus visitors’ attention, and act as gateways to the [intended] messages” (Batty et al. 2016:75). Thus, representative (and often the aesthetically most pleasing) objects speak for the rest of the collection. The challenge here is to provide sufficient contextualization, which must be paramount if a museum is to claim as one of its goals the understanding of another culture, time, or place. This can take the form of images of relevant landscapes or related objects alongside the traditional labels and text panels. Generally, however, the displays remain static and offer little flexibility; single printed labels may contain information for entire cases, while numbered objects are mounted on the backs of cases or on plinths that make them difficult and expensive to rearrange. While digital labels and interactives may offer future solutions for some of these issues, galleries often come alive only through talks and activities—but these are irregular and many galleries remain as mute, passive displays. In contrast, the most active parts of a museum are the temporary exhibitions where different design and interpretation approaches can be tried and more focused messages and contextualization addressed.

In an attempt to confront some of these challenges for permanent galleries, a number of exhibition concepts are being developed at the Ashmolean Museum. As a department of the University of Oxford, the Ashmolean was established in the 17th century as a model scientific institution, designed to combine the functions of a repository for rare and curious materials as well as a research and educational institution (MacGregor 2001). More recently, the Museum’s long tradition of teaching using objects in subjects such as archaeology and art history has been expanded across the University’s faculties with the establishment of the *University Engagement Programme* funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Building on this experience, it is proposed to develop a series of exhibitions exploring some of the universal aspects of human existence: Faith; Love; and Death. Underpinned by a unified design, there will be single case installations of one or a few objects within galleries across the entire museum, each developed by the curator responsible for those parts of the collection (and thus approached through the lens of their respective academic disciplines). As in any object-based class, gallery talk, or seminar, the selected object or objects will be interrogated; supported by labels and images, questions will be asked

and answers suggested that visitors will be encouraged to consider for the other objects in the more traditional displays that surround them. The exhibitions will provide opportunities to explore and contrast systems of values other than our own. Supported by a printed and online trail accessible via smartphones, this would not be a return to the small temporary gallery displays of the past that were often conceived by curators with little concern for their integration into either the gallery or the wider museum. Instead, this would unify the collections; it would encourage repeat visitors to the permanent galleries and *crucially* provide opportunities to integrate the disciplines of art history, archaeology, and anthropology. The aim is to help make at least one ancient Middle Eastern society meaningful to a modern audience by exploring some of its values—as we understand them—alongside those of other cultures, including our own. Thus, a Sumerian votive figurine from southern Iraq has been selected to represent Faith in the Ancient Near East gallery, allowing for an exploration of its use and meaning in the mid-3rd millennium BCE (Figures 2.3 and 2.4). The aim will be to compare and contrast similar concepts using objects from prehistory to the present and across much of the globe.

Making societies of the ancient Middle East understandable through objects is of course highly desirable. Of equal importance, I would suggest, is the use of these same objects to help inform museum visitors about the significance of cultural heritage in the modern Middle East. This is especially necessary at a time



Figure 2.3 Sumerian votive sculpture from Istablat, Iraq, about 2500–2400 BCE  
Courtesy of Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford (AN1919.65)



Figure 2.4 Concept label text for Sumerian votive sculpture display at the Ashmolean Museum

Courtesy of Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

when historic buildings, museums, and archaeological sites across the region are being damaged or destroyed as a result of looting, conflict, and distorted ideology. The challenge will be to make connections between past and present meaningful without diluting or confusing the narrative. The importance of the past in shaping contemporary societies of the Middle East through their shared landscapes, monuments, memories, and histories could be made explicit in museum galleries through select objects: the Ashmolean's Sumerian figurine, for example, was discovered by soldiers of the British Empire who were digging trenches on the eve of battle in July 1917 during their invasion of Mesopotamia; associated labels could reflect on this period that led to the establishment of the modern state of Iraq where the country's rich, but threatened, heritage continues to play a key role in forging a sense of national identity. In this way the statue enters the so-called "heritage cycle": by understanding historic environments and objects people will value them; by valuing them they will want to care for them; by caring for them it will help people to enjoy them; and from enjoying them comes a desire to further understand them (Thurley 2005). Adopting such interpretive approaches would thereby help to establish what a museum should be in the 21st century, a place of debate and engagement with both timeless *and* contemporary themes.



The Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Oxford

### **Brief history**

The Ashmolean was founded in 1683. In 1908 the University Art Collection was combined with the Ashmolean to form the current institution (the natural history, scientific instruments, and ethnographic collections having been established as separate University museums).

### **History of ancient Middle East collections**

A number of ancient Middle Eastern seals and amulets, and two Assyrian reliefs entered the Museum during the late 19th century, but the current collections are largely the result of sponsored excavations during the 20th century (52 sites across Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Palestine, and Turkey) as well as gifts, purchases, and bequests.

### **Annual number of visitors**

800,000

### **Number of cataloged objects in the museum**

1 million

### **Number of cataloged ancient Middle East objects**

40,000

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### 3 Ancient “art” in the white cube?

Or how contemporary art  
creates ancient “art”

*Pedro Azara and Marc Marín*

#### **Introduction: A vision of ancient art**

A brief but essential text by the French writer Jean Genet has sketched an approach to ancient art that is, in spite of the time elapsed, still valid, and has guided our approach and understanding of art from the past, especially Mesopotamian art. This commentary has guided the museography and the museology of two exhibitions: “Before the Flood: Mesopotamia 3500–2100 BC,” an exhibition on Mesopotamian “art” at the Caixaforum Cultural Centre in Barcelona and in Madrid, Spain, in 2012–13 (Azara 2012), and “From Ancient to Modern: Archaeology and Aesthetics,” co-curated by Jennifer Y. Chi, at the Institute for the Studies of the Ancient World (ISAW) in New York in 2015 (Chi and Azara 2015). For these exhibitions, we have curated, selecting items and fixing the scheme of the exhibition, and, in the first case, designing the layout or the scenography, displaying items in the space and relating them to each other. This means that we have tried to “tell a story” with all kind of images—original items, documentation, and modern still and moving images displayed in space.

Even if we have studied the ancient history of the Middle East and even some ancient languages like Sumerian, and even if we are, as architects, members of an archaeological mission led by Dr. Maria Grazia Masetti-Rouault and Olivier Rouault, working at first in Syria and now in Iraq, we are not curators specialized in ancient Middle Eastern cultures. The two exhibitions that are the basis of the two chapters we have written for this publication (see also Chapter 11, this volume) were not exhibitions *of*, but *with* ancient Middle Eastern material. We were “using” ancient objects to think about our relation with the past, even to think about the notion of the past—“our” past. We maintain that we were not dealing directly with an ancient culture, even if we were showing original items and giving as much information as needed to help the visitor to understand the items and the reasons why they had been chosen. We were rather dealing with the way we view these ancient objects: why and how we engage with them; why and how they are interpolated into our narratives; how we were in a dialogue with the objects themselves. The idea that a dialogue might be possible presupposes that we are talking the same verbal or visual language as the objects; if such a dialogue were to be possible, it would have to be conducted in a modern language, the

language that we use. This means that we view these ancient items as if they were modern. This does not mean that we were forcing their interpretation; it means that we looked at them as if they belonged, at least during the time of their public exhibition, to our time. We may also add that this approach may have been possible because we were dealing with a temporary and not a permanent exhibition. A temporary exhibition is an installation that can be used as an experiment, which is not always possible in fixed displays.

This paper distinguishes between the Kantian concept of a work of art defined as a human creation for the sole disinterested pleasure of the senses, in which perceived images evoke the ideas embodied in the work, and the ancient or traditional concept of human creation related to magic or to specific functional needs.

What did Jean Genet say about ancient art? The French writer describes a visit to one of the exhibition rooms with Egyptian statues at the Louvre Museum in Paris in the 1950s, just after the Second World War. These statues were considered manifestations of evil spirits. Genet entered one of the exhibition rooms of the Department of Egyptian Antiquities. It was in a crypt; this was a rather somber vaulted room lit only by small closed windows located in the upper part on one of the wide stone walls looking to the emerald waters of the Seine River—more muddy than green in those days, we would dare to say. The first object he saw, when his eyes adapted to the dark room, was a statue of Osiris. “When all of a sudden, under the green light, Osiris appeared, I was afraid. ... It was as if a heavy hand or weight were forcing my shoulders and my neck to enter Egyptian millennia and, mentally, to bend myself and, even more, to make myself small in front of this small statue with a hard gaze and smile. It was really a divinity. A god of inexorability. ... I was afraid because this was, with no possible mistake, a god” (Genet 1957; translated by authors). This is a most important perspective; a consideration—often forgotten—about what ancient “images” or effigies “are,” about what are they presenting.

We shall try to answer to the question of why Genet’s view of an Egyptian statue of a divinity should be taken into account when dealing with ancient images, and how this opinion can—and should—affect or influence our approach to ancient items such as the Mesopotamian.

### **Ancient items or ancient works of art?**

All kinds of artifacts have been unearthed in Mesopotamia, among the ruins of palaces, temples, and houses: statues, ceramics, cylinder seals, copper items, mud and terracotta plaques and figurines, foundation items, etc. We can remember, for instance, the large collection of King Gudea statues in diorite discovered on the same spot: a square or a room of a Hellenistic palace in Lagash. These statues had been collected by a Hellenistic monarch in different ruined temples in and around the city, during the 3rd century BCE, almost two millennia after they were handcrafted, and had been shown together, as images of ancestors, by the new Macedonian power (André Salvini 2003). Nevertheless, the richest places for most ancient cultures are and have been tombs. Some of the best

preserved cultural products were burial offerings. Some of what can be considered Mesopotamian offerings were in a poor state of conservation when they were unearthed, especially if we compare them with similar objects from Egyptian tombs. The humidity of the soil and high temperatures created an environment that was not suitable for mud and copper objects. Many of them were deformed or broken, important parts missing, due to the weight of the earth over them. It is true that stone was used—for cylinder seals, for instance, and some wall reliefs—but it was a rather exceptional material. Almost no wooden nor textile offerings have been preserved. These offerings are nevertheless useful to understand how human beings lived and acted in the world, how they judged it and reacted in front of it, because it seems that items and tools found in tombs could also have been used in everyday domestic contexts.

These offerings look like tools and items used by living beings: dead people, in spite of being shadows, ate and lived quite as living beings. We could even think that they were almost like living beings because they were offered similar objects. In a sense, the distance, the abyss between the dead and the living people, was shortened thanks to the presence of everyday items in the tomb, as if life after death would not be too different from life under the sun. But the similarities that we suppose existed between items for the dead and items used in everyday life may have not always been true. As Richard Zettler has pointed out recently in an informal conversation with the authors, it would have been almost impossible for Queen Pu-abī to wear in life the elaborate upper part of her dress made of a rain of stone pearls and beads (see Zettler and Horne 1998). The weight of this sort of cape is eight kilograms. It seems unlikely that such a cape would have been of daily use. She would not have been able to move normally. So, if the reconstruction of this cape is true—and this is not certain at all; the cape could have been in fact an offering of beads around the dead body and not something worn by it—this cape could not have been used by a living being; it would have been made only for a deceased person. We could apply this commentary to other burial items. Gold items, such as weapons and knives, would have been useless if someone had tried to manipulate them as everyday tools. As Plato wrote, a tool made of gold may look beautiful but it is in fact ugly because it is useless. For Plato, the quality of the material does not count for the aesthetic quality of a tool: its beauty depends on the fact that it answers well to a need. This may explain why Greek burial items were not always made of precious materials. The perfection of ancient Greek vases and cups was not necessarily dependent on silver, gold, or precious stones.

In any case, burial items were deposited in tombs to be used by the dead in an unusual way, differently from the way living human beings used similar items. They were elaborated and offered to be used in a peculiar or imaginary way. The needs of the deceased might be different from the needs of the living beings or they might be unknown to us, but it was believed that the deceased had needs that had to be answered with tools suitable for them. Offerings had to fill a function—a functional need, different, it is true, from a function that would exist in the living world. They were not shaped to be contemplated; they did not exist

to satisfy the taste of the living beings. They might have been tasteful, but taste was not the point or the purpose to be achieved. They had to fulfill the practical needs—independently of our beliefs and our opinions of whether the needs of the dead people are real needs, or if dead people have any needs at all.

### **Modern notion of art**

If we now turn our gaze to modern Western creations, we would find that the only things that exist only to be looked upon are works of art. Works of art cannot be touched or used. It is true that there are some contemporary works of art that have to be manipulated in order to exist as works of art. Marcel Duchamp made a soft small sculpture, representing a sort of female breast, titled: *Prière de toucher* (“Please touch”), as an ironic answer to so many panels in museums warning visitors to not touch any work of art. The relationship between a human being and a work of art has to be established through the senses, and with few exceptions, the sense of touch—as with the sense of taste: you cannot lick a work of art, nor eat it—is not taken into account. Works of art exist to be perceived by the “superior senses”: the eye and the ear.

Are what we call Mesopotamian “works of art”—this includes items that we display in showcases in exhibitions—“real” “works of art”? It may not be useful to ask this question in this way, as works of art exist in order to be seen from a certain distance.

The disputed modern notion of art was framed by European thinkers such as Kant and Baumgarten in the 18th century. Since the recent notion of agency (inspired by the function of ancient items), a work of art is not perceived anymore as an item created for our own pleasure, but the Kantian notion of art is still used by contemporary thinkers (Michaud or Rancière, for instance). Art is a way of making things; a way of shaping the world; it is a world. Art is a process that ends with the making of a work of art. A work of art is not necessarily an item, a material thing; but it has to be perceptible by the senses. Even in a conceptual work of art, a trace—a visible or material imprint—has to be marked or traced. A (modern) work of art does not answer to any precise function. It fills a function, but this function cannot be well defined. A work of art does not exist to satisfy precise needs. Because, if this were so, works of art would not be needed anymore, and could be thrown away, when physical or spiritual needs had disappeared, having been totally satisfied. This does not mean that a work of art is capricious or gratuitous. It has a function, it has a meaning, its existence is necessary; but why it exists, we do not really know. We know a work of art has to “be,” but we do not have any clear reason for its being in the world.

A work of art, in fact, exists only to make us think—about us, the world, the outer and the inner worlds. It is not an educational nor a magical tool (even if it can be used for educational, even religious purposes). So, it exists in relationship with our mind. The activation of the mind is nevertheless not direct. A work of art, in order to make us think, has to please our senses. This does not mean that it has to be beautiful. It just means that it has to be seen by our

senses, so it has to have a sensual, a sensible aspect: repulsive, ugly, pleasant; never indifferent (in spite of what minimalist artists have said and tried to do). Even a ready-made—a work of art that, Marcel Duchamp said, had to be as anonymous as possible, and void of any aesthetic quality (Duchamp 2013)—was, in fact, a most strange or unusual composition thought up and made to be perceived as a weird and intriguing item: a bicycle wheel on a three-leg stool? Come on! This is not something we see so often every day that we do not look at it. A work of art lets us establish a connection between our senses and our imagination—activated by our senses—and our mind. We begin to think about what we feel. We think about what it is in front of us, or inside us. Our mind has to be connected to our senses. A (modern) work of art does not exist to please us without making us think. It is not a satisfying thing; it has to be intriguing, to make us discover a new aspect of the world and let us think about it; it is like an object that is not in the place we expect it to be, an object that does not fit perfectly with the world. But, at the same time, this wrong or unexpected location suddenly appears right and necessary, letting us see the inner and outer worlds in a different way, or letting us see a new—but until then unimaginable—world which appears now most important and needed. A work of art has to let us inquire about its existence, and about why we do need it. We need images and thoughts evoked by them. Art enlarges our vision of the world. It shows that the world is not the world we expected. It is true that Plato considered that philosophers did not need the guidance of visual images because they were able to enter the world of ideas by themselves. But Plato thought, too, that common citizens could not reach the high level of ideas without the help of their visual projection in an earthly image.

A work of art is thus a most strange thing. It fills a function, but we do not know which function it is. It is needed—it satisfies human needs—but these are unknown. In a modern Western world, we can live without works of art, but then our life is not a true life. They please us, but they do not have to do so. Works of art are not sweets. They are a sort of lens that help us to see the world differently, even if by looking differently at it we might feel uncomfortable. In fact, a work of art has to make us feel unease with the world. It does not necessarily have to shock us, but it has to let us think about our place in the world. So a work of art is, in a sense, a nuisance, because it shows us—or it lets us think about—our problematic relation with the world, our unsuitable place in the world; and these are not always pleasant thoughts, even if they are necessary. Because, if not, we would not act as rational beings.

This is a most necessary function, but this kind of item, a work of art, did not exist before the 18th century, at least in Protestant Europe. The notion and the values of the Byzantine icon helped the notion of a work of art related to a model, but without replacing it, as happened with fetishes. This does not mean that these needs did not exist, but only that needs were satisfied by items that were not works of art. Works of art were a new way to answer our questions about the world and our place in it. Myths, for instance, were another kind of answer, but they were less used or not believed anymore from the 18th

century on. They lost their capacity to explain the world, to tell the truth in a comprehensible way. Works of art, in a way, replaced the function filled before by myths.

When we are dealing with Roman and ancient Greek items, we have words such as the Latin *ars* and the ancient Greek *techne*. Even if these terms do not mean at all what “art” and “technique” mean nowadays, at least they can be compared to modern notions such as not fine arts but applied arts, crafts, or handicrafts. Until the Renaissance, a work of art was a manmade item fulfilling a precise function. Even images, as paintings and sculptures, were not produced for the pleasure of the eyes and the activation of the mind, but for the clear, visible transmission of certain values, as the Trento Council clearly announced. A work of art was a way of education. Its value depended on how it was able to communicate notions, values, and orders, independently of its “aesthetic” qualities. Classical works of art before the 18th century could be beautiful, but beauty was not the main purpose. Veronese risked a death penalty because he gave importance to variety—to sensual pleasure—against legibility. Senses were activated, this is certain, especially since the Trento Council during the 16th century on the importance of images, but aesthetic qualities were not really pursued. Clarity, legibility—not beauty—was the main concern.

### Mesopotamian “art” and “aesthetics”

But what happens with Mesopotamian “art”? Which are the words that designate what we call images: statues, paintings, reliefs? A work of art, or an image, was something presented as an excellent manmade item in ancient times. A good technique was the main characteristic of what, today, we call a work of art. Qualities such as radiance and splendor (Cassin 1968; Winter 1995), priceless materials like precious stones and metals were taken into consideration too when defining what can be considered by us as a work of art, a work that can be compared to a contemporary image. It is possible that our knowledge of the Sumerian language is still—and will always be—insufficient to grasp how human beings’ creation was evaluated, but it is also possible that what human beings were making when evoking a model was not perceived at all like in later times and nowadays. We do not know whether there was something similar to the notion of a work of art, and whether this notion could be possible. We cannot really imagine and think as they did four or five millennia ago. As Foucault (2010) once said, nothing remains of the values of these ages nowadays, buried and destroyed.

*Nam-galam* (*Enki and the World Order*, v. 67—ETCSL 2006; translation by authors) is an expression or word translated as “arts and crafts,” but it means “perfection” or “majesty”; it refers to the handy ability of the demiurge. In this mythical text, *nam-galam* is in a way a synonym of a *me*, which is a Sumerian word that means “arts” or “works of art” (*me-dím* could be translated as shape or figure, but it seems to refer more to living creations): Enki says, in a well-known sentence, that he is transferring the *nam-galam* (the ways or means to shape things, to order the world) from his brother the god Enlil’s house to his own, the Abzu. But what



a god could do was not necessarily what a human being could undertake; on the other hand, *me* was not related only to artistic means, and this relation was not the most important one at all. There seems not to have been a general word to define all kinds of human production made for the sole pleasures of the senses and the mind. The concept of art, as defined by Western art theory, did not exist. It is not clear whether it existed in Ancient Greece and Rome. The category of beauty was not independent of the category of goodness. Both categories were still related in Kant’s philosophy of art, but due to a different reason. “True” beauty was a category belonging to what was necessary and good for life, something which made human beings feel good. It made them good.

We also have to add that there was no difference between the notions of creation (artistic creation) and procreation. The Sumerian verbs *dù* or *dim* were used to describe a god’s action that produces a being, and the work of a builder. Even today, there is still some confusion between creation and recreation—which says a lot about the image of an artist. In Spanish at least, only a capital letter—a capital C—marks the difference between the act of an artist (*una creación*) and the act of God (*la Creación*). The Sumerian term *dug*, which qualifies, for instance, the place that Enki makes “complete with grass” (Enki and the World Order, v. 350—ETCSL 2006) and is translated as “agreeable” (an aesthetic quality), also has an ethical meaning (it means “good and necessary”). Enki’s creation fulfills a clear function. *Dug* characterizes also songs dedicated by Ningirsig to Enki (v. 112), Enki’s wine (v. 259), and last but certainly not least, the fauna in Enki’s possessions (v. 419): in all these cases, *dug* refers to natural items, necessary for life—items that have not been produced or crafted but “just” “created” (as gods are the creators of the living beings and their reason to exist); or, better, items, such as food, that make life more pleasant. *Zid* is another Sumerian term, used as an epithet or an adjective (if we are using our modern grammar structure), that can be translated as “beautiful and correct.” For instance, the house or temple (*e*) that Enki builds for himself is *zid*, but *zid* is not only an aesthetic term but also an ethical one. It means “true, right” at the same time, and can be translated as “life”: Enki’s temple is a living creature. All these commentaries would mean that there were no specific aesthetic terms in Mesopotamia, at least during the 3rd millennium BCE, in Sumerian. This does not reflect a limitation of Sumerian vocabulary, but is just a consequence of the fact that there was nothing like a modern work of art in Mesopotamia.

### Mesopotamian “art” exhibitions

So, can we talk about exhibitions of ancient Middle Eastern “art”? The answer reveals an unexpected dilemma. We can organize exhibitions of Ancient Middle Eastern Art, that is certain, and some important ones have opened in the last years, but what is shown is not Mesopotamian art, but contemporary art. This does not mean that copies, fakes, or recreations are included, of course not; it means that there is no such thing as a Mesopotamian “work of art”: an item—or a spectacle—to please senses, without a clear, specific function while not being



gratuitous, a work that raises disinterested interest. Ancient images had the same effective power as the sacred figures they represent or embody. What we are showing in an exhibition or in a permanent collection in a museum are ancient items transformed into works of art, because they are treated as works of art: this means that they are offered for the pleasure of the senses and the sensual activation of the mind, they are seen as objects created to be contemplated, to be thought of. And these are functions that these objects would not have filled in ancient Mesopotamia. The function or the power of an object was not to make people think critically about themselves and their position in the world, but to act or react in a certain conditioned way.

There has been a great deal of controversy since the 1970s about a certain type of exhibition that includes in the same space ancient items and primitive idols or objects and modern works of art (MoMA 1984). This confrontation was based on the fact that there are some similarities between primitive items and modern ones. This is not surprising, as Picasso himself recognized that he was fascinated by Iberian, African, and medieval images when he was trying new ways of representing, not the appearance of things, but how he was imagining their power. Critics were rapidly fascinated by the formal similarities between African masks and faces of the “Ladies of Avignon.” A known collector like Albert C. Barnes from Philadelphia, at the beginning of the 20th century, displayed in the same room and in a similar way African masks and paintings by modern artists such as Picasso, Matisse, and Klee since the beginning of the 20th century. An exhibition at the MoMA in the 1980s, “‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern” (1984), displayed “primitive” masks and “idols” in the same way as modern statues and paintings—modern works of art, by Gauguin, for instance, formally inspired by “primitive” images. The exhibition was much debated (e.g., Danto 1987) because it was considered that while formally similar, “idols” and (modern) sculptures had a much different function and meaning. This was true, but it was also true that idols had not been crafted solely for pleasure but for magical or religious reasons so they would not have been displayed (but used in rituals and then, maybe, hidden in the dark). They were not crafted to be looked upon and to make the viewer think while he or she was not acting. They were powerful or feared items, for sure, like the Osiris statue that Genet discovered in the somber subterranean room at the Louvre Museum. They were not intended to make people think, but to keep them subdued—even if people would feel safe under the scrutiny of the idols. So the fact that these “primitive” items had been put on display meant that they had been transformed into works of art because they had been chosen and displayed in a showcase in an exhibition. They were not *like* modern works of art, they had *become* works of art. As Borges once wrote (1952), they were more modern than modern works of art, because it was the existence of modern works of art that had led critics and spectators to look at primitive items and to treat them in the same way as a Picasso sculpture. It was modern works of art, and the theory of art behind them, that had produced this magical transubstantiation: from primitive idols to “cubist” or “expressionist” sculptures.

No, there are no exhibitions of Mesopotamian art. Mesopotamian art does not exist, or, to be more precise, it did not exist in Mesopotamian times. It exists nowadays, but not “as” Mesopotamian art. It exists because we display it in exhibitions. It exists because our notion of art has been applied to it in order to evaluate it and compare it to art, a concept defined two hundred and fifty years ago.

An exhibition of Mesopotamian art is not different from an exhibition of modern or contemporary art; and there is no difference because Mesopotamian art is a modern theoretical creation. We need to put the items in context, to explain their background. True, but this happens with cubist works of art, too. Aren’t we far away from the beginning of the 20th century? Do we really look at the world as it was perceived one century ago? Do we have the same values, the same hopes? Europe, Asia, Africa, now and a century ago, have nothing in common. The world was different, and the people were different too, we can imagine. We cannot think like a Mesopotamian. We are not sure we would be able to dialogue with a Spaniard who lived before the First World War.

We cannot evaluate and interpret ancient and modern images without having, inevitably, a large number of images of manmade items from different times and cultures in mind. We judge because we can compare. We compare with what we know, and our feelings and our knowledge are shaped by our time. No, there are not many differences, if any, between Mesopotamian and contemporary items. This does not mean that they both have the same value, but, again, values are subjective. They depend on us, on our criteria, our contemporary times. In a way, Gudea and Koons are the same. For better or for worse.

### Temporary and permanent exhibitions

We have written on exhibitions in general, but as we have mentioned briefly in the introduction, these commentaries are based mainly on our experience as curators and designers of temporary exhibitions only. We have not worked and we still do not work *in*, but *with* museums (and cultural institutions: foundations, art centers—with or without ancient, modern, or contemporary art collections).

However, it would be interesting or useful to consider for a moment whether temporary and permanent exhibitions are the same. This volume deals mostly with practices (selection of items, texts and narratives, and display) in permanent collections. But temporary exhibitions are also a way to educate, to show, to study a modern or ancient culture.

Temporary and permanent exhibitions are related like haute couture and prêt-à-porter. This does not mean that prêt-à-porter is fashion without attitude, a degraded version of haute couture. This means that haute couture, like temporary exhibitions, is a field where experimentation can be tried without the same lasting consequences as in a permanent exhibition. A temporary exhibition is an essay, not an historical study. Ideas, materials, shapes, relations,

and narratives can be tried that would be too hazardous in a permanent exhibition. A temporary exhibition is a trial and error experiment. This does not mean that you should take great financial risks, but it means that it is possible to be more adventurous in a temporary exhibition. Novel ways of associating and displaying items in successful temporary shows can then be applied in permanent exhibitions. We may also propose that a temporary exhibition deals with hypothesis while a permanent display has to deal more with facts, proved facts—or at least facts and interpretations accepted by the academia. A permanent exhibition has to have its feet on solid ground. It cannot change its narrative and display each few months. It needs to exhibit always some items that visitors expect to see. What would happen if the Louvre Museum would put the Hammurabi code stela in the storerooms and not present it as a masterpiece? These changes are only possible and are most welcome in a temporary show—which a museum can or must organize next to the permanently displayed collection.

So, we propose that temporary exhibitions can—or even must—be organized to challenge our ideas and our ways to look at the past. They allow us to see how items belonging to different museums can react when they are put together in the same space, and what they can tell us about them and us. They help us to try to rewrite history, our history. They open new windows—which can bring fresh air or introduce such turbulences that we cannot relate to the past anymore as we used to. Depending on our values, this can be necessary or annoying, this can be promoted or forbidden. The past is always a ballast that we have to manipulate cautiously, sometimes keeping it safely—and sometimes throwing it overboard.

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## Part II

# Perspectives from national museums



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## 4 170 years of curatorial practices and audiences at the Louvre

### Exhibiting ancient Middle Eastern antiquities from 1847 to 2017

*Ariane Thomas*

#### Introduction

Installed in the former Parisian palace of the kings of France, the Musée du Louvre boasts the oldest public collection of Middle Eastern antiquities, having opened the world's first Assyrian Museum on May 1, 1847 (followed shortly by the British Museum's Assyrian Galleries). That was the original core of what is now the Department of Near Eastern Antiquities, one of eight departments<sup>1</sup> in one of the world's largest and most heavily visited museums. Alongside the departments of Egyptian Antiquities, of Greek, Etruscan, and Roman Antiquities, and of Islamic Art (long attached to the Department of Near Eastern Antiquities until its official creation in 2003), not to mention departments devoted to Western arts (Paintings, Sculptures, Decorative Arts, and Prints and Drawings), the Department of Near Eastern Antiquities holds works from a vast region extending from Central Asia to Spain, covering a long span of antiquity from the rise of the Fertile Crescent to the early Islamic period. Given the many attractions and constraints of the collection, the premises, and existing arrangements, it is particularly important to reflect on how this collection can be exhibited to a large and extremely diverse audience, which recent studies aim to help us know better. This paper first presents the nature and history of the Louvre's Ancient Near Eastern collections before discussing their display over time and our current knowledge about the museum's visitors.

#### What should be placed on display?

##### *Advantages and drawbacks of a landmark collection of archaeological objects<sup>2</sup>*

Although it contains the oldest works in the Louvre, the collection of the Department of Near Eastern Antiquities is also the most recent, since these antiquities only came to light from the second half of the 19th century onward.<sup>3</sup>

##### *The rediscovery of the Assyrians: The origins of the collection and the field itself*

Unlike the other departments of antiquities at the Louvre, largely composed of historic—notably royal—collections, Middle Eastern antiquities were rare in



Europe before the arrival of the first Assyrian objects dug at the Assyrian site of Khorsabad by French consul and archaeologist Paul-Émile Botta, a pioneer of Middle Eastern archaeological research who began the very first excavations in Mesopotamia in 1842. The spectacular monumental reliefs he uncovered there were a veritable revelation, prompting a royal decision to found an Assyrian Museum, which opened in two galleries of the north-eastern wing of the Louvre's Cour Carrée on May 1, 1847 (Fontan 1994).<sup>4</sup> Attached to the Department of Antiquities that was headed by Adrien de Longpérier for 23 years,<sup>5</sup> this Assyrian Museum was the world's first public museum of ancient Middle Eastern art. It soon expanded with works rescued from the tragic shipwreck of 1855 that sent to the bottom of the Tigris discoveries made by Victor Place in Assyria (who succeeded Botta both as French consul in Mosul and excavator of Khorsabad) and by Fulgence Fresnel in Babylon. These new objects prompted a revamping of the galleries in 1857, installed in a row of rooms at the north end of the east wing of the Cour Carrée,<sup>6</sup> where they would remain, beneath the main Colonnade, for nearly a century. Shortly afterward, the Mesopotamian collection expanded further thanks to Pacifique Delaporte, another French consul (posted to Baghdad), who in 1864 donated bas-reliefs from the palace of Nimrud and other items uncovered notably at Babylon.

#### *The Levantine, Anatolian, and Cypriot collections*

At the same time, a collection of items from the Levant (that is, the area along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean), Anatolia, and Cyprus began to grow, thanks to works brought back by Charles Texier as early as 1843, followed by the first antiquities from Phoenicia in the 1850s, notably the gift of the sarcophagus of King Eshmunazar of Sidon by the Duc de Luynes in 1856. This core collection was soon joined by finds uncovered in Phoenicia by Ernest Renan, who accompanied the French military expedition to the Levant in 1860. By 1862 these antiquities were displayed in two rooms of the north wing of the Cour Carrée. That same year the Louvre acquired its first Cypriot antiquities, brought back by Marquis Melchior de Vogüé, including an enormous vase from Amathonte. In June 1853, a "Judaic" gallery had been opened in the southern wing of the Cour Carrée to exhibit gifts made by Louis-Félicien (nicknamed Félix) de Saulcy on returning from the Holy Land; this room was reorganized in 1870 following further gifts by the Duc de Luynes, soon joined by the Mesha Stele thanks to Charles Clermont-Ganneau. On August 18, 1891, the Judaic gallery was moved to the "Asiatic" staircase, while in 1892 another room was allocated to Punic antiquities from Carthage, including some thirty stelae donated by Commandant Marchant.

#### *Mesopotamia and ancient Iran: Two core collections of the department soon enriched with other geographic areas*

Thirty years after the Assyrian discoveries, new archaeological excavations in Mesopotamia led to the official establishment of the Department of Near Eastern

Antiquities,<sup>7</sup> which was founded on August 20, 1881, following the plethora of objects uncovered at Tello by Ernest de Sarzec,<sup>8</sup> French vice-consul in Basra, southern Iraq, which revealed the existence of the long-forgotten Sumerians. The objects were displayed on the second floor of the Colonnade wing, above the Assyrian collection, in a gallery called the “Sarzec Room” (or “Small Chaldean Monuments Room”). Léon Heuzey, who actively participated in research on Tello, was the first curator in charge of the department.<sup>9</sup>

During the same period, the collection of this new department was significantly enriched with antiquities from Iran. On June 6, 1888, French president Sadi Carnot thus officially opened the “Large Susa Gallery” (or “Dieulafoy Gallery”), which was placed next to the “Sarzec Room” and which displayed the discoveries made at Susa by Marcel and Jane Dieulafoy. In 1891, in addition to a Judaic room, a “Small Susa Gallery” was also opened. In 1895 France obtained from Nassir al-Din Shah a monopoly on archaeological research in Persia, followed, from 1900 to 1928, by a monopoly on all objects discovered in Susiana (Abdi 2001; Chevalier 2002:131–52). Thus the Louvre received discoveries from the excavations at Susa carried out from 1897 to 1968 by French teams led by engineer Jacques de Morgan, followed by Roland de Mecquenem, and then by Roman Ghirshman. In order to host these finds, notably the large decorative ensembles of glazed bricks, in 1908 the Department of Near Eastern Antiquities annexed premises in the Pavillon de la Trémoille, to the west of the new monumental passageways in the riverside façade of the “Grande Galerie.” The finds at Susa included booty taken in antiquity from Mesopotamia, thereby notably enriching the Louvre’s Mesopotamian collection and contributing to what is today a landmark collection in the two fields of Mesopotamian and Iranian archaeology.

The other fields are no less remarkable, having grown at the same time, notably through a series of Anatolian antiquities (donated by Ernest Chantre followed in the 1930s by finds due to Louis Delaporte), Arabian antiquities, including a stele from the oasis of Teima, and Iberian antiquities installed in 1904 in a ground-floor room in the north wing of the Cour Carrée (including the famous “Lady of Elche,” which the Vichy government would give to Franco’s Spanish government in exchange for Spanish paintings). In the 1920s, Maurice Pézard worked at Kadesh, Robert du Mesnil du Buisson at Qatna, and Maurice Dunand at Byblos, and part of their finds came to the Louvre. Between 1929 and 1939, finds made by Claude Schaeffer at Ras Shamra in Syria (then a French protectorate) considerably increased the Louvre’s collection, as did the extraordinary items excavated by André Parrot at Mari, further east in Syria. The Louvre also acquired Schaeffer’s finds at Vunus and Enkomi on the island of Cyprus. In Iran, thanks to a new agreement, the digs at Susa from 1931 onward were joined by excavations at Tepe Giyan, Tepe Sialk, and Bishapur led by Roman Ghirshman, thus enabling the museum to expand its display of Middle Eastern antiquities to these sites then new to knowledge. From 1925 onwards, as indicated by its shortened title, the department was officially devoted exclusively to Ancient Near Eastern Antiquities and not to all ancient ceramics as it had been from its foundation for 44 years. François Thureau-Dangin, the famous Assyriologist who played a

major role in the deciphering of Sumerian, was in charge of the department from 1925 to 1928, four years, after which he resigned due to progressive deafness.<sup>10</sup> He then excavated in Syria at Til Barsip and Arslan Tash, where he notably found Assyrian wall paintings and ivories some of which were sent to the Louvre. René Dussaud was then the head of the Ancient Near Eastern Antiquities department for eight years. He notably supported the numerous French excavations that enriched the Louvre's collection between the wars, often considered a golden age for archaeology. From 1937 to 1946, Dr. Georges Contenau succeeded Dussaud as the head of the department, for which he obtained an expansion on half of the ground floor of the Cour Carrée. Unfortunately, this project was stopped because of the Second World War. It was finished by André Parrot, who succeeded Contenau after he retired in 1946. After the war, the department's collection received numerous finds from Enkomi, Emar, Beersheba, Tell al-Far'ah, Chogha Zanbil, and the remarkable collections of de Clercq and Coiffard. When Parrot was appointed first director of the Louvre Museum in 1968 with the support of André Malraux, Pierre Amiet became the head of Near Eastern Antiquities for 20 years. He notably expanded the collection to new areas in Iran and Central Asia. In 1988, Annie Caubet succeeded him, followed in 2005 by Béatrice André-Salvini, herself followed by Marielle Pic in 2015. From 1945 to 2003, after the departure of the Asian arts from the Louvre to the newly created Musée Guimet, Islamic arts were part of the Ancient Near Eastern Antiquities department of the Louvre before being established as a department by itself.

*A historic collection and a reference collection basically archaeological*

The bulk of the Middle Eastern collection in the Louvre thus comes from archaeological research, itself related to France's relations with various countries in the Middle East. The Louvre acquired the works according to agreements and regulations established during the Ottoman and Persian Empires. In lands under French protectorate after 1918, following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, items found at excavations were shared—up till the Second World War—between the museum conducting the dig and the country being excavated, a principle maintained in Iran up to 1973.<sup>11</sup> The Louvre's collection thus fairly accurately reflects the history of the field, the museum having played a dynamic part on several occasions in various realms of the relatively new scholarly field of Middle Eastern archaeology. Even today it continues to reflect modern history, notably France's diplomatic relations and the situation in the Middle East. Given its history, the Louvre's collection is quite complete with respect to ancient Mesopotamia and Iran, even though there are still gaps in both areas, especially since archaeological research has subsequently revealed further aspects that remain to be uncovered or better understood. In fact, apart from a few recent gifts and purchases—always conducted with greater vigilance these days—the Louvre's collection is mainly historic since it was built up before the Second World War. That is why today a policy of indefinite loans from several museums has made it possible to extend and complement the display of its collection and the history it embodies.

The collection is also basically archaeological, since the Louvre has served as the repository for various more or less continuous digs, some of them lasting several decades on the same site. This was a clear intention from the very beginning and in 1915, in the midst of an increase in collections, Edmond Pottier, then head of the Ancient Near Eastern Antiquities department, recalled the importance of enriching the collection through scientific missions rather than by acquisitions on the art market (Pottier 1915:368). In this respect, the collection combines artistic masterpieces and historic landmarks with more or less practical, more or less fragmentary, items, plus series of objects in a wide range of sizes from monumental to miniscule, made of materials ranging from clay, stone, metal, and other materials.

Given the collection's long history, geographical and chronological scope, and typological variety, it constitutes a major reference collection well worth studying.

### **How and where should the collection be exhibited? A history of displaying the collection**

In numerous reorganizations over the past 170 years, the Louvre has experimented with methods and locations for displaying this remarkable collection, which can generate various discourses. The history of these displays reflects a trajectory sometimes described as evolving “from exhibiting all to exhibiting well.” This assertion may call for qualification, yet a history of the displays offers a better understanding of how presentation, always related to a given period, has more or less adapted over the years to the constraints of the premises and to different but not necessarily mutually exclusive approaches, whether primarily historic, archaeological, or more artistic.

#### ***The constraints of a royal palace in Paris, a constant parameter***

Right upon their arrival, Middle Eastern antiquities—like the museum's other collections—had to be installed in a former royal palace, where rooms often designed for other uses had to be allocated and adapted. Like most other antiquities, they were primarily placed on the ground floor, given their substantial weight. The Louvre's complex architecture was a major constraint on display, notably imposing unwanted interruptions when, say, a series of rooms were separated by a historic staircase, not to mention the exterior passageways that cut the ground floor of each wing in the Cour Carrée in half until the crypts were built in the 1930s. Furthermore, the splendor of the palace and its historic decoration can almost overwhelm the works in certain rooms (Figure 4.1). Finally, the variety of the Louvre's collections and their arrangement in the palace creates, even today, juxtapositions that may seem startling, such as the placement of early 19th-century French sculpture next to Mesopotamian antiquities. Nevertheless, these unexpected encounters, along with the beauty of the building itself and its setting in Paris, can also contribute to the pleasure of visiting the museum, which is a place of free discovery<sup>12</sup> and enjoyment<sup>13</sup> as well as one conducive to reverie.



Figure 4.1 Current display of the Levantine collection in the Louvre

Courtesy of Musée du Louvre, photograph by A. Mongodin, 2016

### ***1847–1939: Dense displays with attempts at evocation***

From the mid-19th century to the period between the two world wars, Middle Eastern antiquities were exhibited in a very dense display showing a very large part of the artifacts that had been unearthed. Showcases containing tiny objects packed next to one another stood opposite more monumental sculptures and reliefs (Figure 4.2). These dense displays combined items that were not only very diverse but also from different periods. However, over time the freeing of additional space, including the upper floors of the Cour Carrée, made it possible to organize galleries according to major geographic regions. These rooms were then decorated in a way designed to evoke distant lands and periods. Thus the “Sarzec Room” was painted with decorative details inspired by Assyrian architecture as understood at the time, heavily influenced by 19th-century taste (Figure 4.3). The rooms devoted to Susa, on the other hand, were adorned with depictions of the excavations, including a panoramic painting by Philippe Chaperon and Marcel Jambon, along with a model of the Apadana at Susa, and paintings by Jules-Georges Bondoux (Figure 4.4). Casts were also largely presented next to the originals until the 1930s.<sup>14</sup>

Still, even before the First World War—after which the taste would definitely change toward lighter display—curators clearly wished to smooth the galleries. Facing the considerable increase of the collections together with the knowledge about them, they wanted to better present the chronological and geographical



*Figure 4.2* Display of Mesopotamian collection in the Louvre, circa 1900  
 Courtesy of Musée du Louvre, archives



*Figure 4.3* The “Sarzec Room” in the Louvre  
 Courtesy of Musée du Louvre, archives



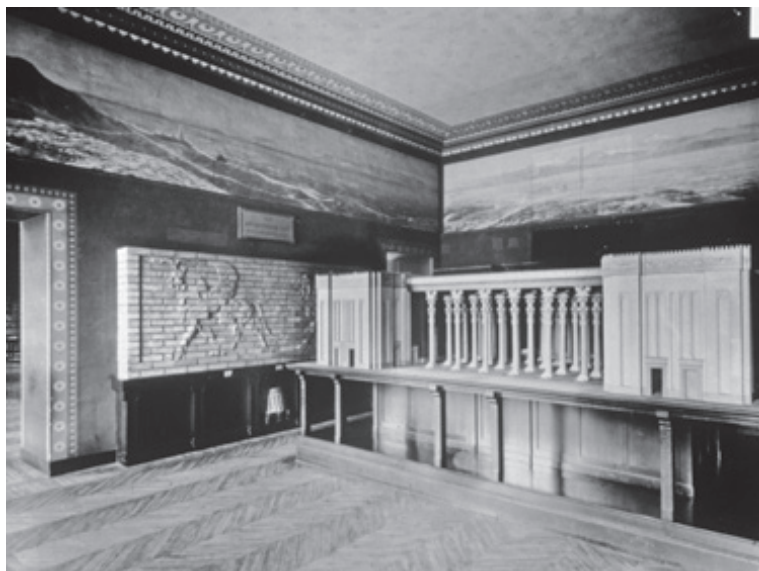


Figure 4.4 The “Little Susa Room” in the Louvre, opened in 1891, featuring a panoramic view of the excavations and a model of the Apadana

Courtesy of Musée du Louvre, archives

fields as they were being discovered but they only could organize temporary exhibitions on the recent French discoveries in the Middle East: in 1924 within the Louvre in the “salle Dieulafoy” and in 1930 at the Orangerie Museum (Dussaud 1930). During the interwar period, René Dussaud and Georges Contenau, successive heads of the Department of Near Eastern Antiquities, reflected on a reorganization promoted by museum director Henri Verne in the goal of a more logical geographic and chronological grouping of works but they only could add maps, pictures of the sites, and didactic texts in the existing rooms. Before planning any global rearrangement of the department, one main goal was to unify the circulation and modernize the spaces. To solve the fact that the collections were exhibited in two distant parts of the palace, in 1932–3, the ground floor of the Cour Carrée was joined by crypts built under the passages. In 1938, artificial lights illuminated the galleries for the very first time. But much of the reorganization had to wait because of the Second World War.

### ***1947–80s: A spacious display of works***

Following the return of the collection (evacuated during the Second World War, except for the large Assyrian reliefs set into the walls, which stayed in the Louvre; Vannier 2016), André Parrot, the new head of the department, and Georges Salles, director of the Musées de France, jointly organized a new display of the



Figure 4.5 View of the 1947 reorganization of the Louvre collection

Courtesy of Musée du Louvre, archives

collection, officially opened on June 27, 1947, to celebrate the centenary of the Assyrian Museum. With the exception of the Assyrian reliefs, which remained in the galleries devised in 1857, Middle Eastern antiquities were moved to new rooms in a deliberately spacious, clean space devoid of decoration apart from the palace architecture itself, all the while creating dramatic perspectives for certain works considered visually remarkable (Figure 4.5). Other items were placed in store or in closed compartments located at the bottom of new showcases installed in 1958. One could thus visit the department with no more rupture since it was reinstalled in 24 rooms and two crypts on the ground floor of the Cour Carrée from the “Pavillon de l’Horloge” to the “Guichets de la Colonnade.”

**1980s–2010s: *The Grand Louvre, overall harmony through an emphasis on stone and metal***

In the late 1980s, the museum was allocated the Richelieu wing of the Louvre, previously occupied by the Ministry of Finance. This move permitted a major rearrangement of the museum’s collections, notably its Middle Eastern collection (Caubet 1993). A series of rooms was thus assigned to the major geographic zones covered by the collection, each being arranged chronologically. A new unity was imparted to the Mesopotamian collection, displayed in a set of rooms around the courtyard called “Cour des Postes”, renamed “Cour Khorsabad” following installation of the monumental reliefs that finally left the gallery they had occupied since the mid-19th century. An attempt was made to evoke the façade



of the ancient palace by taking advantage of the height of the courtyard with its natural, overhead lighting, and by paving it in an evocative (rather than reconstructed) way (Caubet et al. 1993). Labels were deliberately made as discreet as possible—invisible at first glance—in order to favor the artistic juxtaposition of, and emotional approach to, the works on display in this “sur-mesure”<sup>15</sup> space (Figure 4.6). On the other side, boxes were installed from 1993 including detailed texts about the collection in each room. From 1997 to circa 2004, the department also presented multimedia devices about ancient Middle Eastern and Islamic art within its permanent galleries (recent guides to the collection: Département des Antiquités Orientales 1997; Thomas 2016).

In general, the “Grand Louvre”<sup>16</sup> project led to a new exhibition design employing pedestals of stone, like the cream-colored walls and floors, with display cases of metal and glass designed by Jean-Michel Wilmotte aside Ieoh Ming (I.M.) Pei and Michel Macary. This new museography was applied to the entire museum, in particular to its Richelieu wing where decorative arts and French sculpture and painting are displayed, next to Mesopotamian antiquities. This large use of stone, metal, and glass makes it more difficult to grasp the value of the Mesopotamian artworks. The historical rarity of their materials is imperceptible, although stone and metal were costly materials in ancient Mesopotamia, which was largely devoid of them. To the detriment of a more specific approach that would contextualize Middle Eastern antiquities, this display policy above all aims to harmonize the various galleries of the museum, reducing confusion<sup>17</sup> for museum-goers who usually visit several areas of the Louvre, not just a single



Figure 4.6 Cour Khorsabad, installed in 1993

Courtesy of Musée du Louvre, A. Mongodin, 2016

department. It was then clearly stated (Caubet 1993:19) that the Louvre was among the very few important museums of ancient Middle Eastern archaeology to also be an art museum, such as The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York or the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. Distinct from the paintings and other fine arts museums, the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin or the British Museum in London are more specifically archaeological beyond the diversity of their collections.

At that time, curators also noticed that in the United States of America, it is often possible to see ancient Middle Eastern objects in a university museum, a fine arts museum, or a museum of natural history, as in Chicago at the Field Museum of Natural History, the museum of the Oriental Institute, and the Art Institute. This clearly shows that the ancient Middle East can be exhibited through multiple approaches, including ethnology and anthropology, archaeology, epigraphy and philology, art history, or history of techniques. If the richness of the Louvre collection was to combine the historical, anthropological, and aesthetic value of the artifacts, then, it was stated, the new galleries should first “keep the artistic value that is the hallmark of the Louvre.”<sup>18</sup> In addition to the modern exhibition design linked to a mostly aesthetic approach of the collection display, the Paris palace itself creates a magnificent setting, one based largely on stonework that in no way evokes the original setting for Middle Eastern antiquities and even tends, involuntarily, to diminish the items on show through the lavish presence of what were such rare materials (Figure 4.1).

### *Today's challenges, recent experiments*

In addition to the permanent galleries revamped as part of the Grand Louvre project (the Mesopotamian galleries in 1993 and the Iranian galleries in 1997), other spaces for exhibiting Middle Eastern antiquities within the museum have subsequently been created or reorganized. In 2003 a room was opened to display the famous stele of Hammurabi's Code with ochre-colored walls designed to evoke the mud buildings of ancient Mesopotamia. Multimedia installations were notably included in 2012 in the new galleries devoted to the Mediterranean Middle East under the Roman Empire. These developments more or less depart from the principles of unified exhibition design for the Grand Louvre. Even so, while walls are colored looking like mudbricks, objects are displayed in showcases painted in gray, the main color adopted for the whole museum since the Grand Louvre as a unifying touch, so-called “Louvre gray.”

In fact, numerous approaches are now conceivable, thirty years after the Grand Louvre project began, for today we are attempting to get to know our audience better and to embrace new possibilities, notably multimedia. Given the multiplicity of Middle Eastern antiquities, it is tempting to try to reconcile at least the historical, artistic, and archaeological approaches as far as possible, even while making room for modern history and appealing to the imagination. Hopefully in future, the Ancient Near Eastern Antiquities galleries will

even better fit the museum's unity, the history and beauty of the Parisian palace, and the specific contexts related to the objects on display. Various experiments have recently been carried out along these lines, notably during a recent exhibition at the Louvre–Lens Museum, a new place of experiment for temporary and semi-temporary exhibitions led by the Louvre Museum in partnership with French local authorities in the Northeast of France. Based on the Louvre's Mesopotamian collection along with major loans,<sup>19</sup> the show provided an opportunity to display the works differently, not only from the standpoint of exhibition design but also in terms of discourse developed, tools used,<sup>20</sup> and the proposed path of the visit. In contrast to the chronological presentation traditionally employed at the Louvre, a thematic pathway was devised, to better underscore certain constant features of Mesopotamian civilization. Given the appeal of attempting to combine the respective advantages of chronological and thematic paths while maintaining overall coherence, the last part of the show addressed the question of state and empire from a chronological standpoint, punctuated by major figures incarnated by statues placed chronologically along a frieze on the wall. At the same time, the adoption of a thematic approach made it easier to devote space to the history of the field<sup>21</sup> and the way it has been received, as well as to the imaginative constructs inspired by the subject and its main myths.

Taking advantage of neutral, adaptable premises particularly suited to an exhibition design that was highly evocative of the regions and the vestiges found there, several approaches were pursued, each proposing a different level of interpretation. The artistic approach focused on works remarkable for their beauty and/or technique, enhanced by individual showcases with lighting that made them easier to appreciate. The historical approach, meanwhile, stressed works that served as landmarks in Mesopotamian chronology (which does not exclude at all the aesthetic qualities of some of these objects) and also featured texts written in cuneiform. In order to retain visitors' attention on objects initially hard to grasp—such as tablets of writing rather unappealing in themselves, and seals often too small to be noticed—quotations on the walls and iPads developed the content of the tablets (systematically displayed on a neighboring iPad), whereas the seals prompted a play on scale, either by enlarging their tiny figures to a monumental size on the wall, or through an installation that virtually magnified and simulated the use of the cylinder seal.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, the archaeological specificity of the collection was stressed by exhibiting various series of objects: practical, everyday items alongside highly precious ones; fragmentary objects with silhouetted reconstructions of their original; and fragments composing incomplete puzzles that can be reassembled. This exhibition also offered an opportunity to present archaeological ensembles, for example displaying works that came from the same grave or same holy place at a given moment.<sup>23</sup> In addition, exhibiting coherent groups of numerous objects can make them more spectacular, especially when they are small and/or fragmentary. Above all, there was an effort to evoke the context behind the origin of these objects through local photographs of the area, placed on labels or



Figure 4.7 Views of the 2016–17 exhibition at the Louvre–Lens, “History Begins in Mesopotamia”

Courtesy of Musée du Louvre, A. Thomas, 2017

vastly enlarged. Greater context was provided through models, films, and virtual reconstructions.<sup>24</sup> To better give an idea of the ancient scale, re-assembly of monumental works such as the pillar of Gudea (king of the Mesopotamian city of Lagash) and a section of bricks from Khorsabad provided limited reconstructions of monumental mud-brick architecture, which is often hard to envisage once it has almost completely vanished. In addition, drawings and diagrams explained the use of an item or the reconstruction of a pattern or monument. Casts, as well as a few large modern paintings made to scale after the painted walls of palaces in Mari and Til Barsip, enriched the exhibition design, itself inspired by the colors and outlines of mud-brick buildings, thereby further evoking a world so unfamiliar to today’s visitors (Figure 4.7).

## For whom?

### *Getting to know our visitors and fulfilling their multiple, often contradictory, expectations*

As part of an encyclopedic museum that encompasses collections of fine art, history, archaeology, and ethnology, Middle Eastern antiquities have remained in the Louvre while other departments have left it to become independent museums, such as the Musée d'Orsay, the Musée Guimet (for Asian arts), and the Musée de la Marine. That is probably because as soon as they were discovered, Middle Eastern antiquities were considered to be “the essential link connecting the two parts of the chain of civilization ringing the world, which have remained so separate in human minds for so long ... the crucial link that connects East to West.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, right from the opening of the Assyrian Museum, discourse on the collection has reflected not only the state of knowledge in the field and the more or less conscious ideology developed around it at any given time, but also the level of interest shown in it, which even today leads us to address as wide an audience as possible.

### *Between general public and specialists*

For the past thirty years at least, the Louvre—like other museums—has welcomed vast numbers of visitors, most of them tourists who are curious but not specialists. It remains the world's most heavily visited museum, after having hit 10 million admissions per year. Most people (71%) are visiting the Louvre for the first time, and head to the various zones—whether Middle Eastern, Egyptian, or Greek antiquities, or French sculpture or Italian painting—wanting to see famous masterpieces above all, including not only the inevitable *Mona Lisa* but also the *Winged Victory of Samothrace* and, to a certain extent, the Code of Hammurabi.

Yet the Louvre is also visited by numerous specialists, enlightened amateurs, and regulars, as well as many students (over 30% in 2015), notably from the École du Louvre. Indeed, since 1881 the Louvre has housed a school for students ranging from the first year of college to doctoral level. Many of the courses are taught by museum professionals, including numerous curators at the Louvre—some classes are held in front of works in the museum itself. To this end, a geographical and chronological display makes it easier to spatially situate the civilizations studied, especially if the number and variety of works on show is sufficiently representative.

Whatever their level and expectations, these various audiences can also appreciate a didactic display such as the “Timeline Gallery” at the Louvre–Lens Museum (Figure 4.8), an experiment launched in 2012. In a large, single room, a long chronological frieze, ranging from prehistory in the Middle East to the year 1848, is dotted by little zones of works representing geographical areas, each being aligned along the frieze. The Louvre in Paris, however, seems too large and its collections too extensive to apply this approach there. And yet visitors may also like to wander, indeed to lose themselves, among the vastness of the



Figure 4.8 The Timeline Gallery, installed in the Louvre-Lens in 2012

Courtesy of Musée du Louvre-Lens

collections and the palace, enjoying the unexpected connections and reveries that such juxtapositions may trigger.

#### *A better understanding of audience expectations*

In order to get a better knowledge of visitors to the Department of Near Eastern Antiquities, subjects for master's theses were suggested to students at the École du Louvre. One talented student notably carried out surveys from 2015 to 2016 (Robé-Ramette 2015, 2016),<sup>26</sup> an initiative that has since been imitated (Lecomte 2016). She produced a totally original study on visitors to the Mesopotamian galleries, ably advised by Anne Krebs-Poignant, head of research on visitors to the Louvre. The student's project combined observations with interviews of random and targeted visitors, as well as of various professionals involved with the galleries (curators, reception staff, guards, outreach professionals, tour guides, and so on). Sometimes posted at a fixed spot but other times (discreetly) following visitors, she observed them and systematically compiled their various pathways in the form of maps. She furthermore noted focuses of attention, recording which objects they looked at and for how long (less than one minute, more than one minute, more than five minutes). She also noted whether or not they looked at a label or text, whether they took a picture, etc. Thanks to the data thus gathered,

four main types of visit emerged, corresponding to highly variable durations ranging from five minutes to two hours. The first type, “targeted,” entailed a short but targeted visit that focused on specific works. The second, “random,” seemed more haphazard, looking at various things in the same way but with no particular focus and often very briefly. The third type of visit, “thorough,” involved moving through all rooms without stopping anywhere in particular. Finally, a “comprehensive” visit seemed driven by the desire to see and read everything.

Interviews then provided much spontaneous information on visitors with regard to their impressions of and feelings about the galleries. Each interview recorded details of the interviewee’s age, sex, social status, and degree of knowledge of Middle Eastern antiquities, as well as the number of previous visits to the Louvre and the nature of that specific visit. The student also recorded whether the visitor was alone or not, had an audio guide, guidebook, or another book, took pictures or not, and so on. The many questions she asked included a choice among a small selection of words to describe how visitors felt about the galleries, the works that had most struck them, the ones that intrigued them, the reasons for their visit, etc. The student then assembled all these data to show which ones were statistically most frequent.

#### *An ambivalent, contradictory audience*

The study showed that visitors to the Department of Near Eastern Antiquities are highly varied, as they are in the rest of the museum. As in the whole museum, a high proportion (75%) are foreigners, mainly tourists who know little about the subject and are often visiting the Louvre for the first time, not dwelling exclusively, nor for long, in any one given field. Depending on their background, some of them know the ancient Middle East relatively well, a little, or—often—very little or not at all. For that matter, some visitors are occasionally confused by the French name of the department, *Antiquités Orientales*, thinking “oriental” refers to Asia.<sup>27</sup> Obviously, they naturally need material translated into a language they understand. The department is also visited by a population of regulars and students, often with a particular interest in Middle Eastern antiquities and in search of detailed information. Children are also numerous, especially since 2008 when history of arts became compulsory from primary school to high school, including ancient Middle East. Observation and interviews both logically show that these disparate visitors have very different habits, based on highly different intentions and expectations. They nevertheless share certain opinions about the impression created by the current display of the collection. Similarly, it is broadly observed that certain works, including some of the most remarkable, are often overlooked by most visitors. Above all, many visitors regret the general absence of context. The many comments include a few unexpected ones, such as discouragement by the relative monotony of multiple statues of Gudea, which dissuaded many visitors.

As with all discourse, the display of the collection can become outdated over time, especially since the advent of new media, which represent so many potential channels of outreach and education, and hence play an important role in the



lives of many visitors, accustomed as they are to digital tablets and other screens. In fact, several visitors, notably the youngest (given that under-30s constituted half of overall attendance in 2015), complained about the absence of screens in the galleries to provide more explanation. These comments point to paths worthy of exploration and development, although we should not overlook the fact that there exist ambivalences and contradictions not necessarily apparent in what visitors say—theoretical opinions may indeed differ widely from practice.

While accounting for the differing expectations of a highly heterogeneous audience as far as possible and while preserving the museum's overall harmony, a clearer hierarchy of display into several levels would help to valorize masterpieces. For it emerges from the surveys that these masterpieces are not all perceived as such if their placement, lighting, and accompanying discourse are inadequate. Yet more knowledgeable or curious visitors also need to be shown that the collection is composed, in addition to individual items that are particularly noteworthy and/or representative of a given culture, of fragmentary pieces and series of items such as shards of pottery, foundation nails, and other objects that do not interest everyone but fascinate some people, and whose serial nature can be made visually appealing to all. It is also important to underscore certain objects that attract the eye little or not at all due to their small size, such as the seals that were the object of experimental display at the Louvre–Lens. Finally, the museum can help visitors by offering a graded discourse going from the most basic to the most detailed information (for example, when it comes to dating, by offering a high degree of accuracy within a simpler presentation of spans of time). The development of digital tools in the galleries, including virtual reconstitutions, can not only provide greater context and explanation of the collection on show but can also reach remote audiences insofar as such tools can be easily put online. Indeed, the Louvre's website received over 16 million visits in 2016.

## Conclusion

There are countless possibilities for displaying Middle Eastern antiquities and better adapting their display to the varied needs of a diverse audience: the display can be chronologically, geographically, or thematically arranged or these three approaches can be mixed together; it can focus on the context and historical importance of the objects or more on the aesthetic value of some masterpieces; it can show many objects or very few, with lots of explanation or as little as possible, in an intuitively contextualized frame or in a museography more or less detached from the field; it can gather Middle Eastern antiquities with objects from ancient Egypt, Greece, up to more contemporary pieces, etc. This complex field sparks interests that sometimes appear to be contradictory and raise many questions, especially at a time when the regions concerned tragically find themselves in the spotlight of current events. Although an often poorly understood and allegedly arcane field of archaeology, Middle Eastern antiquities play a special role in the Louvre, complicating consideration of their display with the overall museum policy. In general, a museum—and perhaps the Louvre most particularly—is a



site of both knowledge and leisure. It is a place of discovery, of education, of study and research, and yet also a place of pleasure, of relaxation, of freedom and reverie. It is a site of passage between the most specialized research and the general public, between scholarship and creativity, between reality and imagination, and above all between past and present, which inevitably leads us to rethink the display of works for the contemporary world in order to adapt curatorial practices to the public.

### ***Annual number of visitors***

The Louvre remains the most heavily visited museum in the world, with nearly 10 million visitors annually until quite recently (9.72 million visitors in 2012; 9.33 million in 2013; 9.26 in 2014; 8.6 in 2015; 7.3 in 2016). A drop in visitors has nevertheless been noted due to today's particularly difficult situation for the tourist industry in Paris.

### ***Number of cataloged objects in the museum***

The Musée du Louvre holds nearly 570,000 works, without counting the individual fragments or pieces composing a work. The museum's Department of Prints and Drawings has a little over 220,000 works.

### ***Number of cataloged ancient Middle East objects***

The Department of Near Eastern Antiquities has approximately 150,000 works, of which 6,500 are displayed. There are actually many incomplete or serial works that cannot be displayed on a permanent basis, but they are used for specific studies instead.

### ***Temporary and travel exhibitions***

On average, the Department of Near Eastern Antiquities organizes one exhibition per year; it also participates in various ways in many other shows, lending on average nearly one hundred objects.

## **Notes**

- 1 The external Musée Eugène Delacroix is officially a ninth administrative department of the Louvre.
- 2 Concerning the history of the Louvre's collection and its link to the history of French archaeology in the Middle East, see Caubet 1999 and 2001; Chevalier 2002; André-Salvini 2016.
- 3 Except for a few objects entered in the department "des Antiques" earlier. The very first one was an inscribed funerary Punic stele found in Athens and brought to the

Louvre in 1817 (AO 4834). Ten years later in 1827, another object from the ancient Middle East entered the Louvre collection: an engraved bronze plaque from the Levant and found in Egypt, which belonged to the famous collector Henry Salt (AO 15557 = N 8263; N III 3098).

- 4 At first open to the public only briefly, the Assyrian Museum was totally finished and reopened to the public a few months later on December 28 (Aulanier 1964:127). Looking closely, one can still read “Musée assyrien” inscribed on the top of one of the doors in the north-eastern corner of the Louvre’s Cour Carrée.
- 5 Adrien Prévost de Longpérier worked mostly during the Second French Empire until he resigned shortly before the fall of the Empire in 1870. In 1847, while he was only 31 years old, he managed to install the Assyrian Museum in record time. After him, Félix Ravaisson Mollien, who was also a philosopher most famous for being the master of Henri Bergson, worked for 11 years as the head of the Department of Antiquities.
- 6 They replaced the Musée des Moulages, or museum of plaster casts.
- 7 A presidential decree officially detached ancient Middle Eastern antiquities from Greco-Roman antiquities. It stated that the new department involved “the Chaldeans, Assyrians, Persians, Phoenicians, Judaic and Punic monuments,” thus gathering the Assyrian Museum, the so-called Asiatic Antiquities, the Judaic Museum, and the Cypriot collections.
- 8 On the advice of the famous minister Jules Ferry, the French government bought on August 17, 1881, the results of Sarzec’s first four excavation campaigns in 1877, 1878, 1880, and 1881. The excavations at Tello were then continued on behalf of the Louvre until 1933.
- 9 It is thus the most recent of the antiques departments in the Louvre Museum after the Department of Egyptian Antiquities, officially founded in December 1827, and the Department of Greco-Roman Antiquities, whose core has existed since the 18th century. When created in 1881, the Department of Near Eastern Antiquities was united with the section devoted to the ancient ceramics, which was detached from the Greek and Roman antiquities. This peculiar association existed only in the time of Heuzey, who stayed in charge for twenty-six years, and his successors Eugène Ledrain for two brief years and Edmond Pottier for fourteen years, until 1924. It reflected the idea that the civilizations of the Middle East had contributed massively to the development of Greek culture, according to the saying *ex oriente lux* (“from the east, light”). Besides, both Léon Heuzey and Edmond Pottier were former students of the French school of Athens.
- 10 This deafness was a consequence of his involvement in the First World War in the Oriental Expeditionary Force, before serving in cryptographic services until 1918.
- 11 Except in Susa, where archaeologist Jean Perrot ended it in 1968.
- 12 The museum offers and suggests more than it imposes any knowledge. In the Louvre, there is no mandatory visit program for individuals. Even if in some places such as the Villa Borghese in Rome, the visit has to be limited in time, in the Louvre, one can spend the entire day in only one room. The Louvre likewise imposes no directed tour.
- 13 “Enjoyment” is one of the purposes of a museum as defined by the International Council of Museums.
- 14 These casts were published in a specific section in the department’s guides (Péard and Pottier 1913:204–08; Pottier 1917:106–09; Pottier 1924:108–12).
- 15 Dossier de presse, inauguration de l’aile Richelieu 1993:13.
- 16 In September 1981, François Mitterrand, then president of the French Republic, announced the project of the so-called “Grand Louvre” and the relocation of the services of the Ministry of Finance to a new building in Bercy, in order to restore the Richelieu wing to the museum, which this ministry was using. A new entrance of the enlarged and modernized museum was opened in March 1989—this was the pyramid built by Ieoh Ming Pei, which was a symbol of this major project. From July 1989 to November 1993, the Richelieu wing was changed into the current permanent galleries.

- 17 At least it made clearer to the visitors that they are in a single museum, despite the diversity of its collections.
- 18 Dossier de presse, inauguration de l'aile Richelieu 1993:40.
- 19 "History Begins in Mesopotamia," Louvre–Lens, November 2, 2016 to January 30, 2017. Curator, Ariane Thomas. See Thomas ed. 2016.
- 20 Those tools included maps, chronologies, diagrams, titles, subtitles and brief texts, photos, films, listening stations (including one that played a short excerpt from the epic of Gilgamesh read by four Assyriologists with different accents, in order to reply to the frequently asked, but still unanswered, question of ancient pronunciation), multimedia installations (including an original, virtual visit of the Khorsabad palace, plus a system that substantially enlarged and virtually simulated the use of cylinder seals), and so on.
- 21 The history of the field—in which the Louvre played a major pioneering role—is evoked by displaying elements from the period in which the items on display were discovered, all the while remaining close to the items themselves. Thus a painting of Victor Place's excavations by Félix Thomas was hung in the Louvre's Cour Khorsabad in 2015. The canvas is placed so that it is visible in the line of the passage made for the two monumental bulls, one of which comes from Khorsabad's Third Gate, shown on the painting and also photographed by Gabriel Tranchand, who, like Thomas, accompanied Place's mission. A reproduction of the photo has been placed between the painting and the bulls.
- 22 This was made expressly for the show, using images obtained with the so-called "dome" (Reflectance Transformation Imaging Dome).
- 23 A trial had already been conducted with the furnishings of a family grave of the Parthian period, excavated at Hillah, which featured various objects including items already ancient at the time (for example, seals from the 2nd millennium BCE), and which could be presented to the public only by displaying the whole set, as was done during the Louvre's *Babylon* show in 2008, later installed in the Louvre's permanent galleries in 2015.
- 24 Including a virtual visit of the site of Khorsabad, produced in 2016 for the exhibition "History Begins in Mesopotamia."
- 25 "Découvertes des antiquités de Ninive à Mossoul," *L'Illustration* 174, p. 267 (June 27, 1846).
- 26 Grateful acknowledgement goes to Karine Robé-Ramette for her work, as well as to Anne Krebs-Poignant for her valuable counsel.
- 27 A change of name is currently being considered, in favor of the explicit mention of the ancient Middle East. Also the term "Levant" remains obscure to many.

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# 5 Gallery 55 at the British Museum

Mesopotamia 1500–539 BC

*Irving Finkel and Alexandra Fletcher*

## Introduction

The British Museum was founded in 1753 when Sir Hans Sloane offered his extraordinary collection of around 80,000 books, manuscripts, specimens, and objects to the nation, via King George II, for the modest price of £20,000. Following a public lottery, the collection was duly purchased by Parliament, thus creating an institution freely available for “all studious and curious persons” (see Wilson 2002 for a detailed history). Initially, gaining access was more restricted than it is today; tickets were only available on application, but the central and proud principle of free entry for all to the museum has endured almost uninterruptedly from the very beginning (Caygill 1981:6–12). This presents a specific set of challenges when designing displays, since visitors who pay to see an exhibition concentrate on the exhibits in a very different way from those who do not.

The museum has around 100 curatorial staff on the payroll at any one time. All are recognized scholars in their field and this is acknowledged practically by the museum’s status as an Independent Research Organisation, which entitles curators to apply to the same sources of academic funding as researchers in British universities. Given the organizational structure of the museum, only certain departments actively pursue archaeological fieldwork, but research, now more than ever, informs all museum activities relating to the collection (see, for example, Porada and Collon 2016; Simpson 2015; Fletcher et al. 2014; Finkel 2013; Curtis and Simpson 2010).

The museum’s Middle Eastern collections were established in 1825 on the purchase of fine manuscripts, medals, and antiquities from the widow of Claudius James Rich, who had been the British Resident at Baghdad. There was not at that time a distinct department for Middle Eastern antiquities. Thus the vast Assyrian and Babylonian materials from Nimrud, Nineveh, Assur, Babylon, and Sippar—brought to 19th-century London through the work of Layard (1845–51), Rawlinson (1851–5), Loftus (1854–5), and Rassam (1878–82)—were curated first as part of Antiquities, then Oriental Antiquities, and finally Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities. Similarly, the later collections from Nineveh, Nimrud, Carchemish, Ur, Eridu, Arpachiyah, Chagar Bazar, Tell Brak, and Alalakh, variously excavated by Campbell Thompson (1911–31), Woolley (1912–49), and Mallowan (1925–58), were acquired by the museum before a department dedicated solely to their study was created in 1955 (Caygill 1981:38–56). This was known first as the Department of Western Asiatic Antiquities, later the Department of Ancient

Table 5.1 Current permanent galleries for the ancient Middle East

Gallery number	Gallery title	Sponsor	Installed	Exhibition goals
6	Assyrian sculpture and Balawat Gates		1969	Display the collections of Assyrian reliefs in layouts that reflected the original ground plans of the palaces.
7	Assyria: Nimrud			
8	Assyria: Nimrud			
9	Assyria: Nineveh			
10a	Assyria: Lion hunts			
10b	Assyria: Siege of Lachish			Display non-Classical archaeological holdings from the Middle East divided both geographically and chronologically.
10c	Assyria: Khorsabad			
51	Europe and Middle East 10,000–800 BC		2007	
52	Ancient Iran	Rahim Irvani		
53	Ancient South Arabia	Raymond and		
54	Anatolia and Urartu 7000–300 BC	Beverly Sackler	2008	
55	Mesopotamia 1500–539 BC		2016	
56	Mesopotamia 6000–1500 BC		2009	
57	Ancient Levant		1998	
58	Ancient Levant			
59	Ancient Levant		2010	

Table 5.2 Figures on visitors and collections for the British Museum and the Department of the Middle East

Annual number of visitors	c. 6,700,000 annually
Number of cataloged objects in the museum	c. 8,000,000
Objects on display in Bloomsbury	c. 80,000
Objects available through the online catalog	c. 2,000,000
Archaeological collections of the Middle East Department	257,816 objects

[https://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/fact\\_sheet\\_bm\\_collection.pdf](https://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/fact_sheet_bm_collection.pdf)

Near East. In 2007 it was again renamed the Middle East Department, but with this change has come to a broader remit, for the curators now have responsibility for all Middle Eastern and Islamic objects within the museum, from prehistory until the present day. A list of current galleries is given in Table 5.1, and general figures relating to the museum and the department in Table 5.2. The collections continue to expand for both ancient and modern objects. For the archaeological collections, a significant recent acquisition was the remaining ivories from Mallowan's excavations at Nimrud, purchased from the British Institute for the Study of Iraq in 2010.

## Gallery 55

It had long been a matter of sadness to the curatorial staff that visitors characteristically marched through Room 55, "Mesopotamia 1500–539 BC," home to some of the world's most startling treasures, without breaking step. The room is

effectively a corridor to bypass the crowded Egyptian galleries, and in 2014, with the benefit of funding from the Sackler Foundation, the curators decided that something had to be done.<sup>1</sup>

The inherited layout of Room 55 dated principally to the early 1990s (Reade 1993a, 1993b). A later, small-scale intervention in the gallery displays coincided with the major temporary exhibition “Babylon: Myth and Reality” that opened in 2008 (Finkel and Seymour 2008). The installation of a magnificent brick panel from Nebuchadnezzar’s throne room subsequently loaned from the Pergamon Museum, Berlin, made the existing shortcomings of the gallery unmistakable (Figure 5.1). The success of the aforementioned temporary exhibition also highlighted new approaches to the material in Room 55 that we could draw on in readdressing the permanent displays.

We are fortunate in the British Museum to have colleagues who are specialists in exhibition design, interpretation, and production, and this leaves a very specific role within any project team<sup>2</sup> for curators. Our input involved identifying crucial messages about the objects on display, taking a fresh look at apparently familiar objects, and bringing alive their stories. This approach required establishing a curatorial voice within the gallery that might even be humorous, provocative, or surprising, while at the same time maintaining awareness of readership and academic rigor.



Figure 5.1 Installation of the tiled panel from Nebuchadnezzar’s throne room in Gallery 55, December 2014

Courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum

There are, of course, various reasons why people visit museums (Batty et al. 2016:73), among which the importance of the desire to learn has perhaps been exaggerated in the past.<sup>3</sup> This assumption has often led, however, to a noticeably didactic approach to display. We therefore decided at an early stage that our general approach would be to treat the permanent gallery exhibition with care and inventiveness, in the hope that we could command the attention in the visitor that is usually reserved for fee-paying, temporary exhibitions. There is much to be gained by applying insights from successful temporary exhibitions to permanent displays.

### *How could we make the visitors stop and look?*

There had long prevailed<sup>4</sup> an unrealistic and over-complex idea of how visitors would behave in Room 55 (Figure 5.2). The shape of the room itself, the color scheme and the general manner of presentation did nothing to attract the passer-by. Passers-by, of course, by the time they reach the upper floor, are victims of the unacknowledged syndrome “Museum Leg,” which sweeps over human beings within minutes of their entering a given museum, and rapidly prevents their full engagement with either objects, labels, or panels in any way that accords with gallery planning (Batty et al. 2016:74–5). Less apparent but equally concerning with Middle Eastern archaeological museology is the increasing issue of limited public “pre-knowledge” of the very material on display. Since the 19th century, British Museum gallery structure and exhibition of content has taken visitor familiarity with the biblical narrative and Classical authors for granted. This can no longer always be assumed, and we were very conscious of the need for alternative and effective hooks that would be intriguing or recognizable, to appeal to today’s visitors.

### *What were these hooks?*

To start with, we felt it important to promote Babylonian identity within Mesopotamia as distinct from that of Assyria. That is, to make it clear to visitors

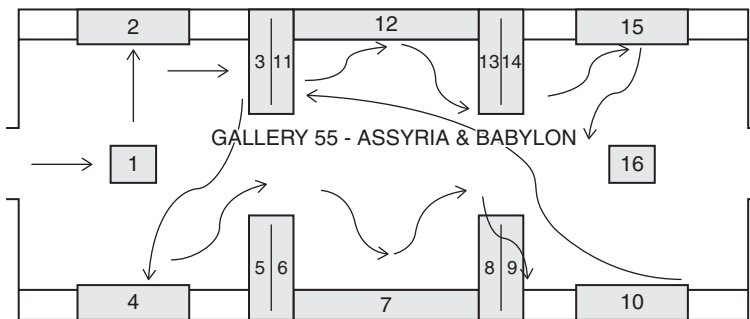


Figure 5.2 Plan of Gallery 55 with theoretical “marching orders” from 1993

Courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum



that ancient Mesopotamia encompassed two separate cultures—Babylonia and Assyria. The British Museum does not hold extensive Babylonian collections, beyond cuneiform tablets. We addressed this in not allowing the displays of Assyrian material to dominate. We turned the shape of the room to our advantage in creating two long runs on either side, distinguished by color (dark blue for Babylonia and red for Assyria). This decision allowed us to draw out both differences and similarities between the cultures, something that had not been attempted previously. Simultaneously we allowed for the likelihood that many visitors would naturally ricochet around the gallery by putting together groups of objects that made sense however one approached them. Each showcase would therefore have a strong narrative and could stand alone. This removed any need to try to impose on the visitor a route around the gallery, as had been done previously in the same space.

The arrival of the tiled panel from Berlin emboldened us to make the most of the central gallery space. This required the bodily removal of two giant central cases that had been in place since 1993, as far as any of the curatorial staff could remember, and thinking very carefully about which of their objects would be really needed in the new gallery, even though the amount of space available was ample. We prioritized cohesion and narrative in our selection over, for example, typology. This meant some showcases were fuller than before and others less so. Our conviction was that the public would naturally linger and look twice at beautiful objects magnificently displayed. The new installations replaced flat, glazed housing with open, three-dimensional displays that dispensed with any barrier that would inhibit appreciation. This step virtually demanded that we install an Assyrian relief of comparable quality opposite the Babylonian panel to provide balance for the whole gallery. Integral to this was a new four-person seat, placed directly between the two sculptures with the deliberate aim of encouraging dwell time and contemplation. Survey has shown that this plan was well-conceived and visitors are often to be seen inspecting the sculptures carefully. It would appear that “Museum Leg” can be staved off.

Specific lessons, as indicated previously, came from the temporary Babylon exhibition, which encouraged us to introduce within the permanent display obvious Babyloniaca (the Hanging Gardens, the Tower of Babel) that had previously found no mention at all in the gallery. Primary among these were objects in cuneiform writing that overlap directly with the text of the Old Testament. Here in particular we needed to cater for casual visitors, scholars, and specialist tour parties, each with different needs and expectations, and this led us to exhibit these extraordinary finds together in one case for the first time. This was no attempt to cover “Biblical Archaeology” fully in the displays. Rather we knew that for many visitors it would be surprising to discover excavated objects that relate so closely to the Bible, in a gallery about Mesopotamia. Similarly, many will have heard of the Tower of Babel, but few realize that the description in the Bible story was based on a real monumental building at Babylon about which we know a great deal from texts and archaeology combined. Despite a

dearth of exhibitable material in our collection from this building, we felt able to exploit this hook by including a large color reproduction of a familiar 16th-century painting of the tower (a major departure from the Museum's traditional, collection-led approach). In the same spirit, we tried to do justice to the proud fact that the city of Babylon once sported *two* of the Seven Wonders of the World, the city walls and the Hanging Gardens (Finkel and Seymour 2008:104). Neither of these iconic topics had been touched on in the earlier gallery display.

The Assyrian side of the room also witnessed innovations, for the wall relief in particular needed imaginative presentation. Flat, monochrome Assyrian sculpture is notoriously difficult to showcase, and here again, we profited from a Babylon exhibition innovation in showing an image of the relief with color restored, side by side with the original. The palette chosen was based on recent pigment analyses (Verri et al. 2009; Guralnick 2010; Collins 2008:27). Moving this well-known Nineveh sculpture (BM 124928) upstairs into Room 55 has enabled visitors to react to it within the context of other Assyrian material culture. Since the relief depicts a historical campaign in Egypt, we surrounded it with specifically selected military equipment and images.

Our biggest challenge was the royal library of Nineveh, the pride and joy of King Ashurbanipal (668–ca. 630 BCE) himself. Some twenty thousand cuneiform tablets from this library, excavated by Austen Henry Layard and his successors from the mid-19th century, are now one of the Museum's most significant resources. Indeed, from a humanitarian point of view this library is of incalculable importance, for it represented the first articulated attempt to assemble all written knowledge in one institution, long anticipating the comparable Library at Alexandria. The whole collection in London is now digitized and available through the Museum's website. Cuneiform tablets, however, do not speak for themselves. To the uninitiated, a pile of them recalls dog biscuits, for they are usually flat, brownish, and monotonous-looking. The earlier gallery installation had tried to combat this by selecting contrasting shapes, sizes and shades for exhibition in the faint hope that the effect would be eye-catching (Figure 5.3).

The exhibition team proposed to start from the idea that we were dealing with an ancient *library* so that the fact would be obvious at first glance. To realize this required a complete rethinking of both content and presentation. We introduced Ashurbanipal on a text panel as Chief Librarian and tried to show how his library functioned, with tablets grouped to indicate the royal collecting policy, how incoming manuscripts were procured, how new library copies were written out, the use of traditional reference works, and the secret world revealed by archived court correspondence. A library-like construction of shelves and cubicular compartments fitted into the wall case enabled us to represent these ideas physically in an immediate and understandable way. We took as our inspiration the library excavated by Walid Al-Jadir at Sippar (Al-Jadir 1998:714–15; Fadhil 1998, pls. 211–13). The top shelf is even stacked with tablets as if waiting to be pulled down and consulted.



Figure 5.3 The old Kuyunjik Library case as arranged in 1993

Courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum

### ***How to explain what the library tablets say?***

Full translations are excluded for practical labels and are in any case beyond the patience of even an interested visitor who would have to stand up while reading. Our new idea was to select the most telling sentence from each document, and this has been printed in white on the shelf front beneath. From a distance, these quotations do not disturb the library effect, but close-up they are clear and give an immediate window into the world of Assyria to anyone who cares to read them. The visitor, in other words, finds him or herself *reading books in the library*. An unlooked-for benefit here has been tweetability of such quotations. One with a spell to send a fractious baby to sleep (BM K.9171) has been especially popular.

Good lighting made all the difference. The system suggested by the exhibition designer was to illuminate each cubicle with LED strips placed so that the writing was lit from above. This meant that the cuneiform signs became easy to see and the fact that the exotic and unfamiliar writing on these tablets was intelligible to us more credible. The result, in fact, transformed biscuits into jewels (Figure 5.4).

All too often there is no acknowledgment of the remarkable personalities who collected our objects or read our inscriptions for the first time, or a clear indication of the period when all discovery and acquisition took place. It seemed desirable, therefore, to include likenesses of famous 19th-century figures such as Edward Hincks, Henry Creswicke Rawlinson, and William Henry Fox Talbot, all of whom were important in the decipherment of cuneiform script. In the same vein, we have included a large photograph of a pre-war British Museum display of archaeological material from later Mesopotamia within an original 19th-century wall-case. As the self-same objects are now exhibited in the gallery, this



Figure 5.4 The new Kuyunjik Library case as arranged in 2016

Courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum

subtly reinforces the important point that the collections have been in London for a long time. It is an obvious but essential point that objects collected in the 19th century will seldom have the same sort of data attached to them regarding context as they would if they were excavated today.

To complement this perspective, we feature the archaeologist Austen Henry Layard and cuneiform scholar George Smith in new island cases at each end of the gallery. One narrative focuses on the story of Smith and the famous Flood Tablet from Ashurbanipal's library, the other celebrates Layard's romantic gift to his new wife of jewelry made from Assyrian cylinder seals. These cases are ideally placed to help keep visitors engaged with the gallery since the objects within them are iconic and fully accessible from all angles. Accessibility was also key with Nebuchadnezzar's so-called *East India House Inscription*, a tour de force of cuneiform calligraphy in stone which had previously been exhibited lying down. Today the visitor can inspect this masterpiece from both sides, and at the same time learn that this object is not unique—as has always been taken for granted—for a large fragment of clay in our own collections (BM 122119A) proved recently to carry the same august inscription.

The fact that many of our objects have been in the museum and indeed on exhibition for many decades has sometimes meant that their accepted purpose or meaning go unquestioned by curators or by visitors. Work on the gallery led us to look again at all the exhibits in order to clarify their best contribution to the gallery. Sometimes this process forced us to a complete reappraisal with quite

unexpected results. The most dramatic concerned the famous Sun God Tablet, box, and “covers” (BM 91000–91004), which resulted in such drastic reinterpretation, re-dating, and repositioning within the gallery plan that we had to write it up (Finkel and Fletcher 2016).

One controversial decision was to dispense with two categories of material which would normally be assured a place in a Late Mesopotamian archaeological gallery. This meant, first, that we entirely ruled out using cylinder seals as exhibits. This was certainly a break with didactic tradition, but the authors had long noticed that the effect left on gallery visitors made by serried ranks of barely visible stone seals with drab impressions and detailed labels to boot was one of utter disinterest. This is not to say for a moment that we do not care about cylinder seals. Dominique Collon has just published the last of six catalog volumes of our seal collection (Porada and Collon 2016), and first-rate digital images and object records—in every way more helpful and effective—are systematically being made available together online. Exhibition, however, is a different matter. One single cylinder seal (BM 114704) was, notwithstanding, retained, for it perfectly illustrated a specific point about the Kassite period. A similar prohibition was imposed on otherwise appropriate objects of light-sensitive ivory, for their inclusion would have meant that all items in range would be shrouded in gloom (below 200 lux). As a result, everything in our reincarnated gallery is brightly lit and thus more inviting to explore.

Panels and labels likewise benefited from a new approach. Friendly or questioning captions now help to draw in the reader and encourage engagement and inquiry. Once in a while, an object in itself demanded a lighter touch. Foremost among these is the unique and celebrated (but far from beautiful) nude (BM 124963), which carries a remarkable Assyrian inscription (Grayson 1991:108). It suggests that a royal but cuckolded husband distributed many copies of this grotesque figure throughout his kingdom to bring scorn and derision upon his wife. Here the only caption that seemed to sum things up was *The Last Woman Standing*.

Today Room 55 is often crowded.<sup>5</sup> People are looking at objects, pointing things out to their friends, reading our texts. The contrast with what happened before is striking. Curators in major public museums have the advantage of being able to work in an interdisciplinary manner with other “communities of practice”: professionals dedicated to exhibition design, visitor engagement, or museum interpretation. Museum displays have to provide a successful symbiosis between the aesthetic and the intellectual. They have always had to look good and have interesting content. When changing our permanent displays, a focus on connecting with different audiences has proved very fruitful. The British Museum long ago declared itself to be a place for “studious and curious persons” and accommodating this idea is set firmly at the heart of curatorial practice. Now, “looking twice” is encouraged in the layout and content of displays and visitors are no longer expected to follow a set chronological path around each gallery space. Instead, visual and verbal hooks catch the eye in the hope that the curious will linger and in so doing become more studious as they are drawn further into appreciation of the marvelous objects on display and their fascinating stories.

### ***Department of the Middle East: Temporary and traveling exhibitions***

The British Museum lends its collection around the world. In the last five years, the museum has loaned on average 1,982 objects to UK displays and 1,841 objects internationally. Over the last ten years, the Middle East Department has responded on average to around 10 external loan requests per year and further contributed each year to approximately three major touring exhibitions generated by the museum itself. Loans vary in size from a single object up to around 170 for a touring show.

## **Notes**

- 1 A sequence of revealing evaluations has taken place in this gallery.  
 2008 (before the small-scale intervention):  
 100 people were tracked in the gallery, 65 were interviewed and 177 people seen just walking straight through. The key findings were:  
 Average time spent in gallery: 1 minute 39 seconds.  
 Average time spent at an exhibit: 21.1 seconds.  
 Object with highest attracting and holding power was the Flood Tablet (40 people stopped for an average of 49 seconds).  
 Other popular objects were cuneiform tablets and cylinder seals.  
 23% had visited the gallery intentionally.  
 47% of visitors were browsers.  
 No adult groups visited  
  
 2014 (after the lion panel went in):  
 100 people were tracked in the gallery, 0 were interviewed and 149 people seen just walking straight through. The key findings were:  
 Average time spent in gallery: 1 minute 24 seconds, one of the lowest in the Museum.  
 67% visitors looked at one object only. The attracting power of the displays was generally low.  
 The walkthrough rate had reduced from 64% to 60%, but was consistent whether visitors entered via Gallery 54 or 56.  
 Object with highest attracting and third highest holding power was the lion panel.  
 The cuneiform tablets had the second highest attracting power and second highest holding power.  
 Other popular objects were boundary stones, terracotta figurines, tablets and seals, pottery and stone dishes.  
 30% of visitors were browsers.
- 2 The Room 55 team comprised Irving Finkel, Alexandra Fletcher, Jonathan Taylor, curators; Julie Carr, interpretation officer; Karl Abeyasekera, 3D design; Suzanne Ben-Nathan, 2D design; Jonathan Lubikowski, project manager; the Middle East collections management team, led by Wendy Adamson; with support from the departments of Conservation, Science, Development, and Security. Project build was by MER Services Ltd.
- 3 Audience behavior in galleries is tracked in detail through observation and interview, conducted by both staff and volunteers.
- 4 Permanent galleries at the British Museum as a rule do not see major renovation at intervals of less than 25 years. This means they hardly reflect current debate.

- 5 Visitor tracking within Room 55 during November and December 2015 subsequent to the refurbishment has revealed:  
55 people were tracked in the gallery.  
Average time spent in gallery has increased to 3 minutes 10 seconds.  
Longest dwell time recorded during survey: 17 minutes and 22 seconds.  
Significant decrease in percentage of visitors who walked through without engaging with any part of the display.  
A full summative evaluation of the redisplayed gallery will be undertaken in the future, allowing a direct comparison to be made between the old display and its successor.

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## 6 Unlocking architectures— communicating cultures

### Ancient Middle Eastern worlds in the Vorderasiatisches Museum<sup>1</sup>

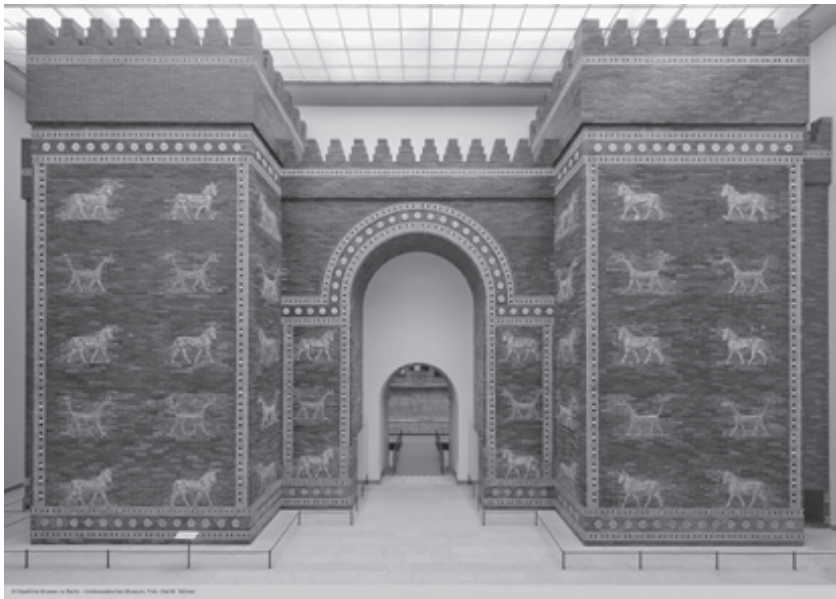
*Lutz Martin*

#### Introduction

The Vorderasiatisches Museum (VAM) of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (SMB)—Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (SPK)<sup>2</sup> is the only museum in the German-speaking world specializing in the history and material culture of ancient Middle Eastern societies (Salje 2001). With about half a million objects, it is one of the largest museums of its kind in the world. In the permanent exhibition of the Vorderasiatisches Museum, only about 2,000 objects are on display. What makes it truly unique internationally is its huge collection of objects from archeological excavations in Iraq and Syria (e.g., Assur, Babylon, Uruk, Tell Halaf, Habuba Kabira) that came to Berlin when the respective excavation finds were divided up as was the practice at the time of these excavations. These objects allow us to trace the cultural history of ancient Middle Eastern societies from the beginnings of settled life at the end of the Neolithic period through the invention of writing and the emergence of urban settlements in the 4th millennium BCE right up to the first centuries CE. Highlights in the VAM collection include not only the world-famous Ishtar Gate (Figure 6.1) and the Babylonian Processional Way, but the monumental architecture from Uruk, the city of the legendary ruler Gilgamesh, and the meticulously restored stone sculptures of Tell Halaf. The VAM's cuneiform collection with some 35,000 objects is also one of the world's largest and most varied (Figure 6.2). The current exhibition halls were installed in 1958 and have barely changed. Until 1990, the financial and human resources in East Berlin were very limited so that no major changes to the permanent exhibition could take place. In the 1990s the Masterplan Museuminsel was developed, and it includes the general renovation of the Pergamon Museum. In this context, a new conception of the permanent exhibition of the VAM is planned—an exhibition that has remained almost unchanged for more than 50 years.

The Pergamon Museum, including the Antikensammlung (Classical antiquities), the Museum für Islamische Kunst (Islamic Art), and the VAM (ancient Middle East), has about 750,000 visitors annually (Bernbeck 2000:98–145; Hiller von Gaertingen 2014; Jakob-Rost et al. 1992; Salje 2001). The visitor number includes about 14% visitors from Berlin, 44% from Germany, and 42% from abroad.





*Figure 6.1* Reconstruction of the Ishtar Gate of Babylon, 6th century BCE  
 Courtesy of Vorderasiatisches Museum-SMB, Olaf M. Teßmer



*Figure 6.2* Depot of the cuneiform collection of the Vorderasiatisches Museum  
 Courtesy of Vorderasiatisches Museum-SMB, Olaf M. Teßmer

Due to the renovation of the Pergamon Museum, which is to be completed in 2030, no special exhibitions are currently being held, but the museum participates in exhibits with loans to approximately ten exhibitions per year in Germany and abroad.

As a research institute that has traditionally focused on object-related research,<sup>3</sup> the VAM also possesses all the scientific competencies necessary to unlock and communicate its museum holdings through their suitable presentation in the Pergamon Museum. The VAM has set a high goal for itself in the reformulation of the permanent exhibit: presenting its unique holdings in such a way that the material elements of ancient Middle Eastern societies are not simply understood as isolated elements, but rather are presented as part of an integrated approach to communicating those aspects of the ancient society to which they give testimony.

The VAM sees itself as a research museum for the archaeological heritage of ancient Middle Eastern societies; it presents its holdings to specific target groups primarily as material evidence of cultural praxis, while systematically studying them to ascertain their research history, provenance, and cultural significance. In addition to the curators, guest scientists also contribute to the studies of the holdings as part of their projects.

The VAM's new permanent exhibition in the south wing of the Pergamon Museum (Figure 6.3) will open to the public under the leitmotif “Unlocking Architectures—Communicating Cultures: Ancient Middle Eastern Worlds in the Vorderasiatisches Museum” in 2030.<sup>4</sup> For the first time in the museum's history, it will combine the presentation of ancient Middle Eastern cultural history

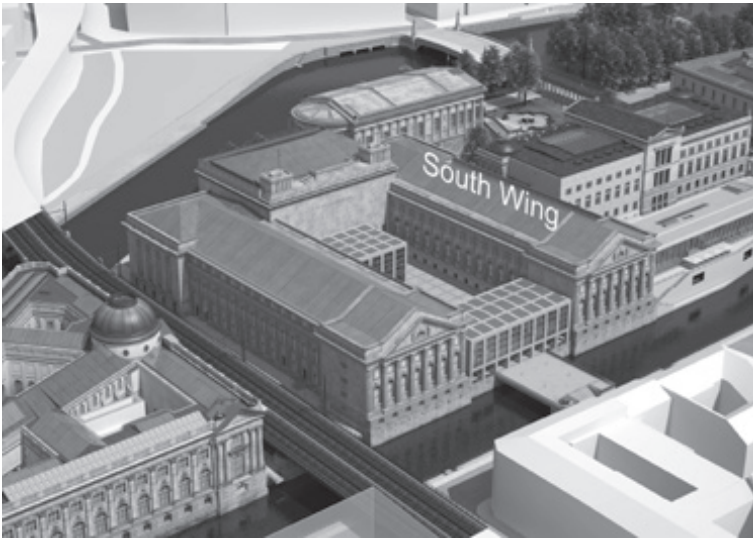


Figure 6.3 Computer simulation of the south wing of the Pergamon Museum  
Courtesy of SPK/ART+COM, 2015

in its full thematic and material breadth with archaeological and museological background information. The aim is to highlight the particular significance of the objects exhibited in terms of cultural policy, not least in the context of the commitment of the VAM and of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz to protect cultural assets.

### ***History of display in the VAM***

The new exhibition concept references, adapts, and comments on the central ideas and design principles of the visionary historical presentation of ancient Middle Eastern monumental architecture—above all the Ishtar Gate and Babylonian Processional Way, as well as the cone mosaic façades from Uruk. This part of the permanent exhibition, conceived as a “museum in a museum,” will recreate the experience of Walter Andrae’s<sup>5</sup> original concept and place it in its cultural and historical context, though not reproducing it exactly.

Turning the Middle Eastern Department into a “living museum” was the declared aim of Walter Andrae, who was appointed to succeed Otto Weber<sup>6</sup> as its director in 1928. Starting in 1930, visitors’ experience was shaped not only by the monumental architectural reconstructions themselves but by 12 large-format paintings on the walls (Figure 6.4), “whimsical overhead lighting,” and gray-speckled walls that “refreshed” the eyes (Andrae 1988:279–84). Some of these elements have been preserved to this day.

Until 1930, the Vorderasiatisches Museum was located in the cellar of the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum (today the Bode-Museum). The exhibition rooms were



*Figure 6.4* Painting of the Kings Gate of Boghazköy and the artist Elisabeth Andrae  
Courtesy of Vorderasiatisches Museum-SMB

accessible only by appointment. In the Pergamon Museum, the collection was given its own rooms for the first time. Among the problems that arose as the Pergamon Museum was finished were the enormous ceiling heights<sup>7</sup> and the need to align the central axis to the Ishtar Gate. It was this that led Andrae to compare the south wing to an off-the-rack suit that “doesn’t fit front or back.”<sup>8</sup> Although the floor plan was largely predetermined, he was able to alter the exhibition areas in the lateral galleries “Babylonia” and “Assyria” by setting up some partition walls that served to “offset the boring uniformity of the series of large windows.” In designing the galleries, moreover, he took care to give the different exhibition areas different color schemes and shapes in order to establish a chronological sequence. Some notable examples are the Citadel Gate from Sam’al (Zincirli), the Karaindash façade, and the red, blue, and green galleries.<sup>9</sup>

To reproduce the Processional Way, the Karaindash façade, the Uruk cone mosaic decoration, and the Sam’al Citadel Gate as realistically as possible, Andrae had modern replicas made of the connecting baked-brick walls. This artifice served not only to enhance the spatial effect and sense of depth, but also to downplay the height of some of the galleries. As a link between the lion frieze and the cornice, this modern suggestion of a mudbrick wall should now be considered as an integral part of the architectural reconstructions and therefore restored to their original condition (the state of 1930) as closely as possible.

Andrae, as an anthroposophist and artist, had grappled intensively with colors and their effect on the human eye, therefore the buildings he reconstructed are to be returned to his original choices for colors and textures. If initial color investigations are anything to go by, we can expect the Parthian façade, for instance, to have a completely new and breathtaking effect on visitors. The façade, which owing to its monochromatic color scheme now seems mannered and lifeless, was once a lively arrangement of shadings, nuances, and gradations.

Since objects and display cases are rarely more than two meters tall, ceiling heights of eight or even 14 meters were felt to be a disadvantage in almost all the galleries. Andrae solved this problem by commissioning large-format paintings that were intended to overcome the excessively high ceilings. Under his supervision, 12 murals were created to convey an impression of the excavations, “as if you were standing in front of these ancient images in their natural landscape” (Andrae 1988:82). To achieve this effect, the palette had to be carefully matched to the color of the walls and of the exhibits themselves.

Andrae’s approach to the walls differed radically from that of the other collections in the Pergamon Museum. To protect the colorfulness of his exhibits “against the flawed complementary colors of the walls and ceilings or floors,” he had adamantly opposed any single-color scheme. Instead, the gray-speckled walls were intended to stimulate visitors to the Middle Eastern Department to actively use their faculty of sight—an effect which called for a carefully calibrated template and precision color coordination. The visual effect of this design principle on the vast expanses of the wall is impossible to reconstruct. Although the original color scheme is indeed preserved in a few places, it was nevertheless decided when renovating the galleries that it should not be imitated, as an authentic

reconstruction of his original subtle color coordination between object, wall, and light would be very difficult and would not be feasible nor could it be accomplished in the time-frame.

### **The new exhibition concept**

With the construction of a west wing between the north and south wings of the Pergamon Museum, a main circuit walk will be possible in future. The famous architectural reconstructions of the archaeological collections at the museum will be presented along this circuit walk. This will enable visitors to experience 4,000 years of architectural history: from the Kalabsha Gate from Nubia and the portico of the Sahu-Rê Temple from Egypt (Figure 6.5) dating to the 3rd millennium BCE, to the entrance area of the Western Palace of Guzana (Tell Halaf) and the Sam'al (Zincirli) Citadel Gate (Figure 6.6) from the beginning of the 1st century BCE, continuing along the Processional Way leading to the Ishtar Gate of Babylon from the 6th century BCE, then the Market Gate of Miletus from the 2nd century CE, the Pergamon Altar (Figure 6.7) dated to the 2nd century BCE, and finally the façade of the desert castle Mshatta (Figure 6.8) from the 8th century CE.

The completely new part of the permanent exhibition of the Vorderasiatisches Museum to be installed on the lower and upper floors of the Pergamon Museum



*Figure 6.5* Computer simulation of the portico of the Sahu-Rê Temple, 3rd millennium BCE. In the background one can see the entrance area of the Western Palace of Guzana

Courtesy of SPK/ART+COM, 2015





Figure 6.6 Reconstruction of the Citadel Gate of Zincirli, 10th/9th century BCE  
 Courtesy of Vorderasiatisches Museum-SMB, Olaf M. Teßmer



Figure 6.7 Rendering from a 3D model of the Pergamon Altar, 2nd century BCE  
 Courtesy of SPK/ART+COM / Pergamonaltar: Fraunhofer Institute for Computer Graphics (IGD),  
 2016, funded by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media (BKM)



Figure 6.8 Computer simulation of the façade of the desert castle Mshatta, 8th century CE

Courtesy of SPK/ART+COM, 2016

will flank this presentation of monumental architecture and construction engineering developed over several generations and now under heritage protection (Hilgert and Cholidis 2014:4). In addition, the exhibition will be designed with a multimedia display designed to the latest scientific and didactic standards and supported by the material evidence. The new exhibits will highlight the many other areas of cultural praxis in the ancient Middle East, including society and daily life, the cult of the dead, writing, knowledge cultures, and religion. In the VAM's new permanent exhibition, the former key concepts "architecture," "outdoor space," "object orientation," and "historical research areas and presentation" will be contrasted with and enhanced by "culture," "indoor space," "thematic orientation," "current research paradigms," "cultural life," and "contemporary didactic presentation"—together these two groups form a coherent whole (Hilgert and Cholidis 2014:4).

In its new permanent exhibition "Unlocking Architectures—Communicating Cultures: Ancient Middle Eastern Worlds in the Vorderasiatisches Museum," the VAM will present itself as a "multiple museum," combining aspects of a museum of art and architecture, an archaeological research institute, a museum of culture, a museum of scientific and cultural history, and an interactive museum.<sup>10</sup> The historical contingencies of the current permanent exhibition (its thematic focus, selection of objects, scientific grounding, and didactic concept) are understood not as a legacy issue but rather as an opportunity to include a multi-perspective

view in the future exhibition (2030) of the material culture and history of ancient Middle Eastern societies and of the ways in which their cultural actions are studied and presented in museums.

To maximize the learning experience and facilitate knowledge acquisition, the VAM plans to take note of visitors' individual approaches and to support and challenge them during their visit. This presupposes a fundamental rethink of the methodological and didactic concept underlying the VAM's communication work, which will have to reach beyond merely presenting certain exhibits. The VAM's new permanent exhibition will therefore utilize digital media that can draw on modern communication channels and reception habits, allowing content to be tailored to individual needs.

Today, in particular, when we are witnessing the ongoing loss of cultural assets (heritage) in the Middle East as a result of political crises and armed conflict, another crucial task of the VAM is to function as a museum ("safe haven") for the archaeological cultural assets of the countries of origin. In concrete terms, this means presenting the objects in their larger archaeological, historical, cultural, and political context. Such an approach requires not only confronting the imperial background<sup>11</sup> of the VAM's collections, but also addressing questions relating to the protection of cultural assets, the historical relativity of the concept of cultural heritage, and interdisciplinary research into this heritage (Hilgert and Cholidis 2014:3–4).

Lastly, the new concept underlying the permanent exhibition is intended to make the VAM an experiential space for the visitors that is far more participatory and interactive than it has been in the past.

The presentation of objects in a museological ensemble of architectures and artifacts essentially rests on certain theoretical assumptions. These relate to the status of objects within social, epistemic, and scientific practices, to the specific functions and tasks of museums, and to the reception of museologically contextualized objects by visitors.

When devising a new concept for an exhibition, therefore, it is essential that these various premises be taken into account, named and defined, and, wherever possible, integrated as premises for "Analysis" and "Further Details" in the media-based communication concept.<sup>12</sup>

The many years of experience and the large collection of the VAM are an ideal basis for learning and experiencing the ancient Middle East. Developing an inspiring and educational route for various groups, like schoolchildren, students, and children with parents, is one of the VAM and the SPK's declared aims described in its mission statement.

### ***Spatial and thematic structure of the new permanent exhibition in the VAM***

Because the new permanent exhibition in the south wing of the Pergamon Museum is to be spread over three floors, the VAM will be able, for the first time in its history, to present a comprehensive description of ancient Middle



Eastern societies and their cultural practices that is structured both thematically and spatially, and covers the archaeological study of these societies right up to the present day.

The lower level, entitled “Underworlds: Archaeological Excavations in the Middle East and Ancient Middle Eastern Funerary Architectures,” will take the visitor on a journey into metaphorical “underworlds” by describing different forms of ancient Middle Eastern funerary architecture. Another focus of this section will be the methods used by archaeology, whose scientific endeavors after all tend to be concentrated underground. The theme will thus match the location of this section within the Pergamon Museum.

The main floor exhibit will be devoted to “Outside Worlds: Monumental Architecture in the Ancient Middle East” and will present examples of ancient Middle Eastern monumental architecture as they stood outside, thus conveying an impression of what ancient Mesopotamia looked like. The concept of the permanent exhibition on this level will thus be of a piece with the thematic orientation of the new “main circuit walk” of the Pergamon Museum.

The motto of the upper floor, in the section called “Inner Worlds: Knowledge and Cultural Practice in the Ancient Middle East,” is “Let’s look inside!” The display here will incorporate more than just elements of interiors, however. Avoiding a purely spatial approach, the focus for the first time will be on the “inner worlds” of ancient Middle Eastern cultures and their players. The exhibit will illuminate inner-societal discourses and development processes, while also visualizing the strategies of ancient Middle Eastern societies, with their diverse cultures, to develop ways for dealing with the world around them. Needless to say, religious concepts and cult practices will play a prominent role here.

The exhibit galleries will introduce visitors to ancient Middle Eastern worlds by illustrating concrete situations drawn from the biography of historically attested individuals. These “Life Paths,” highlighted by material and written remains, will be the common thread providing thematic and formal links between all three levels of the VAM’s new permanent exhibition. By presenting both characteristic occupational groups—a merchant, brewer, alewife, scribe, craftsman, musician, official, teacher, and so on—and characteristic situations of daily life in the ancient Middle East—birth, marriage, education, disease, debt, exclusion, prostitution, debt slavery—the VAM will take a new conceptual approach that invites visitors to engage in personal encounters in which alien elements are embedded in the familiar.

Since our aim is to create an inclusive presentation, one essential point in developing the VAM’s new permanent exhibition has been to ensure that the content is clearly structured and readily understandable for all visitor groups, especially people without a background in ancient Middle Eastern studies. The general theme of each of the three levels of the new permanent exhibition will therefore be broken down into several different topics, occupying several interconnected, color-coded rooms. These room topics will in turn be subdivided into subtopics, each of which will be defined by clearly formulated questions and didactic objectives.<sup>13</sup>

### *The communication concept*

The communication concept of the VAM's new permanent exhibition is based in principle on the guidelines set out in the SMB's general communication concept for the Pergamon Museum following its reopening in 2030. It aims to reach diverse groups of people and to be as inclusive as possible. As things stand now, the individualization of content implied in the concept will be realized first and foremost through the targeted use of digital media information, to which visitors, wherever possible, will have access over their mobile devices.

The communication concept of the VAM's new permanent exhibition is directly linked to the digital media concept.<sup>14</sup> The former provides the content and structure for the latter.

The guiding principle in terms of infrastructure is to use stationary media sparingly and at the same time to individualize content wherever possible through the use of mobile devices (tablets, smartphones, etc.) linked to a wireless network. The media working group of the SMB is currently discussing how best to implement this media-based concept in the Pergamon Museum, including the technical prerequisites for it. Meanwhile, the various departments have been tasked with adapting their content specifically to media-based forms of presentation.

The VAM considers a clear structuring of the content to be essential, even in the planning phase. The VAM favors a four-stage communication concept with the following structure:

- 1 Communication
- 2 Analysis
- 3 Further Details
- 4 Interaction

Depending on the topic or question, it should be possible to call up two, three, or even all four of these levels via an app provided either on the media stations or on mobile devices.

Under the heading "Communication," the topics and content of a particular room or section will be presented to special target groups (e.g., schoolchildren, visitors with limited time, students of ancient history).

Under the heading "Analysis," specific topics or objects will be presented in greater depth or contextualized in line with the visitor's individual interests or prior knowledge. Visitors could, for instance, tap into detailed information on the history, archaeology, iconography, grammar, paleography, or material analysis of a given object or objects, enriched with the relevant visuals or videos.

The attention of the curators also focuses on the armed conflicts in the Middle East and their immediate consequences, both for the archaeological heritage of the countries affected and for the identity of immigrants from the Middle East. The public's heightened sensitivity to these issues is reflected in the large number of visitor queries regarding the provenance and cultural significance of comparable objects that visitors have specifically come to see. The heading "Further

Details” would thus provide the space for discussing questions of relevance to the biography of a given object or provide interesting examples of restoration work and additional background information. By entering the keyword “Ishtar Gate,” for example, the visitor would be able to call up information on the theater backdrop of the Gate on a scale of 1:1 that Andrae commissioned in 1928 in order to drum up financial support for his reconstruction of the Gate.

Under the fourth and last heading, “Interaction,” visitors could be invited to engage in an interactive, open-ended dialogue with the selected object or topic. Among the options being considered here are the inclusion of social networks, blogs or a link to SMB digital,<sup>15</sup> a quiz (again tailored to individual target groups), free-of-charge downloads, tips on further reading, or upcoming events.

## Summary

The new concept of the permanent exhibition aims to emphasize our current knowledge of the ancient Middle Eastern societies. The purpose is to show the cultural-historical roots of human history and to establish current references to today’s socially, politically, and culturally relevant questions.

The new permanent exhibition intends to convey ancient oriental life to the visitor in the form of narratives. The focus is not a pure object presentation but the processing of topics from different social areas. The previous focus of the exhibition on archaeological sites, object groups, and a strict chronological classification has been replaced. Instead, today’s topics such as daily life, administration, religion, agriculture, craftsmanship, school, etc. will be illustrated by objects, written sources, and media technology. Ancient Middle Eastern life should also be made tangible for the visitor in the form of biographies of historically testified persons and concrete life situations. In addition, the new exhibit conveys what we know about each topic at different periods of the ancient Middle East.

A second important aspect of the new exhibition is devoted to issues of the acquisition of sources, the provenance of the objects, and the history of research. It should be clear how the collections were created, on what basis the objects came to the museum and what the museum contributes in cooperation with the antiquity services and museums in the Middle East for the preservation of the cultural heritage of mankind.

To summarize, therefore, we can say with confidence that the VAM’s new exhibition concept will transform a presentation whose basic underpinnings have remained unchanged for a hundred years, and that by doing so, and by embracing the presentation options now open to us, it will provide the visitor orientation expected of a 21st-century museum.

## Notes

- 1 I would like to thank the organizers very much for the invitation to be part of the ASOR workshop “Museums and the Ancient Middle East: Curatorial Practice and Audiences” in Atlanta. I have also to thank the director of the Vorderasiatisches

Museum Berlin, Markus Hilgert, and my colleagues for the permission to present the framework of our conception for the new permanent exhibition. I would like to thank very much Dr. Federico Buccellati, Berlin, for the correction of the English text and valuable references.

- 2 The Staatliche Museen zu Berlin belong to the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation), which also presides over the Staatsbibliothek (Berlin's state library), the Geheimes Staatsarchiv (archives of the former state of Prussia), the Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut, and the Staatliche Institut für Musikforschung (State Institute for Music Research) and its museum of musical instruments. The Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation was established in 1957 to preserve and expand on the cultural legacy of the former state of Prussia (<https://www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de>).
- 3 Under the auspices of the museum and in cooperation with the Deutsche Archäologische Institut (German Archaeological Institute) or the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft (German Oriental Society), the Uruk and Assur Projects were carried out during the last 20 years. The basis for these projects was the study of the finds from the German excavations in Iraq, which were presented for the first time in a larger context (regarding Uruk, see Boehmer 1985–2003; for Assur, see Renger 2011–12). From 2002 until 2010 at the VAM the Tell Halaf restoration project was carried out, the most comprehensive restoration project undertaken by the museum since the late 1920s (Cholidis and Martin 2010).
- 4 The basic ideas behind the new exhibition concept for the VAM were elaborated by Markus Hilgert and Nadja Cholidis in collaboration with Birthe Hemeier, Geraldine Saherwala, and the author. These ideas will shape the collection and its message once the overall renovation of the Pergamon Museum has been completed.
- 5 Walter Andrae (1875–1956) was a German architect and director of the VAM from 1928 to 1952.
- 6 Otto Weber (1877–1928) was a German Assyriologist and director of the VAM from 1912 to 1928.
- 7 The Pergamon Museum was planned as an architectural museum. As such, it was designed to include the presentation of architectural reconstructions, e.g. the Pergamon Altar and the Market Gate of Miletus—which is why the architects had planned high halls. The decision that the ancient Middle Eastern collection should be shown on the first floor was not taken until the building was completed (see e.g., Bernbeck 2000).
- 8 Letter from Walter Andrae to Otto Kümmel, director general of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, from June 25, 1939 (SMB-ZA, I/VAM 20, Bl. 33).
- 9 The Citadel Gate and the Karaindash façade were designed in the color of mud brick walls (light brown). In the green hall were the monuments from the excavations in Fara, but also objects from the art market dating to the 3rd millennium BCE. The red room showed the interior design of an Assyrian palace room with orthostat reliefs from the Neo-Assyrian period and wall paintings from the Middle Assyrian time. Monuments from the Parthian and Roman periods were exhibited in the blue gallery (Staatl. Museen zu Berlin 1936:24–36).
- 10 In contrast to an art museum in which artifacts are showed from an artistic point of view, in the new conception, the artifacts are to be embedded in their functional and cultural-historical context.
- 11 On the imperial background of the collections of antiquities in Europe, see Trümpler 2008.
- 12 The medium-based communication concept includes the dissemination of information by means of digital communication systems (e.g., museum apps, real virtuality).
- 13 For example, consider the Tell Halaf room: topic = Tell Halaf studies, 1st subtopic = Excavations of Max von Oppenheim and the Tell Halaf Museum in Berlin, 2nd subtopic = Destruction and restoration of the Tell Halaf collection, 3rd subtopic = Recent studies of the iconography of the Tell Halaf monuments and new excavations.

- 14 The digital media concept of the SMB is still in development; however, access to the online collection database or the library database of the museums, for example, will be included. The technical implementation will be carried out taking into account the rapidly developing field of media technology.
- 15 Online collections database, <http://www.smb-digital.de>.

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## 7 And now for something completely different

### The renewal of the ancient Middle Eastern gallery in the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities

*Lucas P. Petit*

#### Introduction

“From hunter-gatherers to farmers and townspeople.” This could be the title—although a rather tedious one—of any ancient Middle Eastern gallery in any museum. The idea of the ancient Middle East as the cradle of civilization still dominates museum concepts and continues to fascinate visitors. This Orientalizing story is told chronologically, from the time of the hunter-gatherers towards highly sophisticated and well-organized societies, often interspersed with geographic (e.g., Assyrian and Babylonian galleries) and thematic modules (e.g., a language room). Visitors experience hundreds of static objects and read informative texts about processes, new inventions, and important developments. Even though most museum curators are aware that the cradle of civilization is a somewhat outdated and simplistic idea, they find themselves forced to follow this conventional path. The Middle East is simply too big a region for a more balanced overview. The consequence, however, is that permanent ancient Middle Eastern galleries have seen little or no change in their concept since the early 20th century, even though the rest of the museum world has evolved considerably (Vergo 1989). The Dutch National Museum of Antiquities (NMA) broke with this long tradition in 2013 and re-opened the gallery in, according to some, a revolutionary and refreshing way.

#### The “cradle of civilization” virus

Peoples, civilizations, and the material cultures of the ancient Middle East are so diverse that the attentiveness of the visitor can only be held by simplifying the region’s complex history. Museums are therefore forced to present simplified accounts and to repeat general developments, such as the emergence of settled life, the domestication of plants and animals, the rise of the city-states, and the start of writing, combined with local examples from the Fertile Crescent. So what is wrong with that? Visitors can still be astonished by the beauty of hundreds of masterpieces and the impressive, innovative ideas of its inhabitants. The problem with

this concept, however, is that visitors are not aware of the diversity of the material cultures within this region. They view the areas surrounding Mesopotamia, such as Turkey, Iran, or the Arabian Peninsula, as underdeveloped regions, only presented in the exhibition due to their location in the Middle East today. Scholars and museum staff may see it differently, but most museums with ancient Middle Eastern collections, as well as their visitors, have been affected for ages by what I would like to call the “‘cradle of civilization’ virus.”

The theory of Mesopotamia being the cradle of civilization—or human culture’s infancy (Bahrani 2011:56)—was institutionalized during the early 19th century, even before the first real excavations started (Hegel 1956:165). Not long afterward, world museums acquired large Middle Eastern collections, and Mesopotamia became Orientalized for Western consumption (Said 1978; Bahrani 2011:62). In principle, the story of developments in the Fertile Crescent may be historically correct, but it is reduced to oversimplified, general characteristics. Mesopotamian history is presented as a mythical pre-European past and this evolutionary model can still be recognized in many ancient Middle Eastern permanent galleries today, although often covered with a touch of modernism. The call of Said in 1978 to be more reflective in dealing with the “Orient” did, strangely enough, not make it to museum galleries.

There are two crucial questions that an ancient Middle Eastern curator must ask before even thinking about renewing an ancient Middle Eastern gallery. The first question is an obvious one: Is it possible at all to present a modern and balanced history of the ancient Middle East, considering the size of the study area and the many thousands of years of history? Hardly any other curator has to cope with an equally diverse material culture. Certainly, large world museums, such as the British Museum or the Louvre, do have more space to explain this variety, but in principle, every museum has the same honorable though difficult task of presenting the history and material culture of the ancient Middle East to a general public in a simple package. How to connect in a logical way an Urartian helmet with an Aramaic ostrakon or Luristan material with biblical archaeology? Museums solve this problem by focusing on the relationships between objects and the Mesopotamian heartland, the origin of Western history. Those relationships are strictly speaking not wrong, but the information distracts the visitors from the uniqueness of local societies and their material culture. It furthermore places Mesopotamian objects incorrectly higher in rank than material culture from adjacent areas. The second question concerns the public: What do visitors want to see? In other words, should the museum adapt their galleries to the desire of the visitors, or should the visitors be surprised by the ideas of the curator?

### **A common ancient Middle Eastern concept**

Most visitors of the NMA—and you can fill in any other archaeological museum—have seen major collections in the world. They know the story of Assyria and Babylonia, they are informed about major innovations that formed our Western societies, and they have seen most of the world’s masterpieces. Would it be so



strange to believe that visitors do not come to the NMA to read about the cradle of civilization, yet again?

Studying the history of Western (as well as Eastern) museums shows that ancient Middle Eastern galleries are presented in a very similar way during the last century or more. Whether it is the “cradle of civilization” virus, the influence of Orientalism, or the conservatism of the public, the outcome is the same. Random pottery vessels illustrate early pottery production, a few cuneiform tablets prove the development of writing, and hardly visible cylinder seals show the presence of long-distance trade. Is this factually wrong? Probably not. But specific information or the meaning behind a particular pottery vessel or cylinder seal is overshadowed by spectacular stories of important and often interregional processes. A beautiful backed flint knife is not interesting because it was crucial for cutting animal skins, but because it represents a prehistoric settlement in the Fertile Crescent on its way to complexity. Static and authentic anchors of the past (the objects) are used to explain the universal history, with Mesopotamia as “human culture’s infancy.”

The ancient Middle Eastern collection in the NMA is large enough to use the same contextual approach, despite some minor gaps. We have flint knives, all kinds of pottery vessels, and objects with writing on them. We could have told the traditional story with excursions to Assyria, Babylonia, or the biblical world. But we didn’t, because we are convinced that each object contains a story that is interesting for a larger public. Museum exhibitions should not only illustrate, but also inspire, educate, and provoke (cf. Phillips 2011:185; Macdonald 2011:9; Anderson et al. 2015). I would argue here that the traditional story, including the “cradle of civilization” theory, is not fulfilling its goal anymore, and that objects deserve more than just filling gaps in our Orientalizing past.

## **The ancient Middle East at the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities**

The above-mentioned questions and discussions played an important role during the renewal process of the permanent ancient Middle Eastern gallery in the NMA in 2011 and 2012. To understand the renewal, it seems necessary to briefly outline the history and content of the collection (Akkermans 1991; Kluitenberg 2006; Petit 2013). The NMA, founded in 1818, has a long history of collecting and exhibiting. The Egyptian and Dutch galleries are especially well known and are among the strongest in the world (Amkreutz and Willemsen 2010; Schneider 2014). The ancient Middle Eastern department is a relatively young one; independent galleries were only opened in 1959 (Figure 7.1) and its first curator, Guido van den Boorn, was appointed in 1979. The ancient Middle Eastern collection contains today a little more than 18,000 objects, which is approximately 10% of the total number of objects in the NMA. Besides several masterpieces bought on the antiquities market, like a Gudea head and a decorated Luristan shield, the main attractions are groups of objects: a Jericho tomb, a large group of Byzantine glass vessels from Lebanon, an impressive Iranian collection, and





*Figure 7.1* The 1959 ancient Middle Eastern gallery in the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities. The large reliefs and stele in the background are casts

Courtesy of the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities

excavated objects from sites like Shechem, Jebel Aruda, Tell Selenkahiye, and Tell Deir 'Alla (e.g., Kerkhof 1969; Van den Boorn 1983). Due to gallery renewals (Figures 7.2 and 7.3) and an increase in temporary exhibitions to around eight yearly (museum-wide), the number of visitors received by the NMA has increased from 75,000 in 2005 to a maximum of 217,000 in 2017. The average number of visitors per annum over the past four years was over 160,000. Since 1989 the museum has carried out fieldwork in Syria and Jordan (e.g., Petit and Kafafi 2016). This is possible because the NMA is one of the state museums in the Netherlands with its own budget for scientific research. The underlying idea behind extra state support is that the public should be informed by curators who are part of the academic and scientific community.

In 2011, it was determined that the colorful ancient Middle Eastern galleries set up in 2001 (Figure 7.3) were a little out of date, as was some of the information on the text panels. This former gallery, curated by Peter Akkermans, focused on specific topics, such as kings, towns, language, religion, and pottery. About 550 ancient Middle Eastern objects from different areas and times were shown to explain particular themes. The archaeology of northern and western Iran was given extra attention, as was intercultural exchange, especially with the Mediterranean. The visitors were inspired by archaeological objects, a scale model of a settlement mound (excellent for educational purposes), a reconstruction of one of the Jericho tombs, colored photographs, and text panels. It was



*Figure 7.2* The 1988 ancient Middle Eastern gallery in the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities

Courtesy of the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities



*Figure 7.3* The 2001 ancient Middle Eastern gallery in the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities

Courtesy of the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities

well received by the younger generation especially, although the human skeletal remains in the Jericho tomb unintentionally got most of the attention. The combination of an art arrangement and traditional themes pushed the necessity of informing the visitors about a universal history of the ancient Middle East to the background. In many ways, this arrangement was a first hint for the change that would occur in 2013.

### **The renewal of the ancient Middle Eastern gallery**

The limited number of objects in the NMA and the many gaps in the ancient Middle Eastern collection, both in time and space, partly answer the question of why previous curators did not exactly follow the traditional chronological path through the ancient Middle East. There were too few objects dated to the pre-historic period and only a limited number of collections from the Classical or late historical periods. But most problematic when trying to tell the “cradle of civilization” story was the absence of a major collection from Mesopotamia. The NMA has more objects from adjacent areas than from the supposed center of all innovations and developments.

Arguing that each object—no matter how artistically or aesthetically valuable—has an intriguing story to tell, the present author together with colleagues from the Public Affairs department decided to concentrate in the new permanent galleries on how the museum acquired its collection. Many Dutch travelers, diplomats, and archaeologists have played an important role in the formation of the ancient Middle Eastern collection (Petit 2014a; 2014b). By focusing on the acquisition history, we were able to present the archaeology and history of the



*Figure 7.4* Natural materials dominate the design of the 2013 ancient Middle Eastern gallery in the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities

Courtesy of the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities

objects and associated culture, and additionally, we could bridge the gap with the present. Instead of a static scenery, the objects would become more dynamic and personified by adding information about the excavator, the collector, the diplomat, or the adventurer. Topics like collection ethics, forgeries, and excavations could easily be mixed with information about ancient cultures.

After two months of renovations, in April 2013 visitors were able to enjoy a little more than 400 objects on a floor area of 245 square meters (Figures 7.4 and 7.5). By choosing fewer objects, it was hoped that those objects would get more public consideration. The objects were organized in five different groups, determined by the reasons for adding the objects to the ancient Middle Eastern collections: (1) material culture associated with the land of the Bible, (2) objects showing ancient Middle Eastern writing, (3) objects revealing links with plants or animals, (4) objects representing military and political power, and (5) objects brought to the museum for ethical reasons, or the exact opposite.

## **The Dutch and the ancient Middle East**

One of the oldest reasons of collecting in the Netherlands was the object's association with the land of the Bible. Already in the 16th century, the many cabinets of curiosities in the Netherlands, such as those from Bernardus Paludanus and Otto Heurnius, were filled with assumed biblical objects, some of which were of archaeological interest (Petit 2014a:73–4). Little has survived from those years in the NMA, except for a piece of grey limestone from the Dead Sea (Petit 2013:105). After the founding of the NMA in 1818, it took almost a century before Dutch scholars and amateurs returned to their interest in the land of the Bible. They had been active in the field of linguistics during the 19th century, but not much material culture was added to the museum collection. This would change through the work of Franz Böhl in the early 20th century. Born in Vienna, Böhl followed his Dutch mother to the Netherlands after his study in 1913. He was appointed a young professor in Hebrew language and Israelite antiquities at the University of Groningen. In the years that followed, he became more and more convinced that Dutch scholars should be more active in archaeology. With the help of some Dutch colleagues, he managed to collect enough money to help the German archaeologist Ernst Sellin to start his second campaign at Tell Balata, better known as Shechem (Sellin 1926; Böhl 1927). Almost 3,000 objects from the excavation seasons in 1926, 1927, and 1928, including an altar, were given to the NMA as a reward for Dutch support (cf. Kerkhof 1969; Petit 2013:23–32). Many years later, in 1955, the NMA acquired another important biblical collection: one of the Jericho tombs from the Kenyon excavations, dated to the Middle Bronze Age (e.g., Franken 1959:145; Kenyon 1965:286; Erkelens and Petit in press). The interest in the land of the Bible remains unchanged, although Dutch archaeologists and museum staff became less and less dictated by religious motives (Petit 2014b). In 2011, the University of Leiden donated more than 2,000 objects from the Jordanian site of Tell Deir ‘Alla to the NMA. Deir ‘Alla is a site in

the Jordan Valley that was the center of Dutch archaeological research for more than 40 years (e.g., Franken 1992; Van der Kooij and Ibrahim 1989). Generally, we can say that the value of all these “biblical” objects is not defined by their aesthetic outlook or precious raw material, but lies more at an emotional level: a religious value, due to their origins in the land of the Bible. The consequence was that many of these objects did not see the world outside the storerooms until the gallery renewal in 2013.

Just as old is the Dutch interest in the scripts from the ancient Middle East. The Dutch have a long tradition in the field of linguistics and were one of the first nations whose travelers copied characters that were unknown at that time. Cornelis Speelman in 1652 and especially Cornelis de Bruijn in 1704 made relatively correct drawings of cuneiform texts in Persepolis (De Bruijn 1711: pl. 131–4; English edition published in 1720). De Bruijn later took original samples with him in order to give colleagues in the Netherlands the opportunity to decipher this script. These Dutch scholars failed, giving the stage to Grotefend, Rawlinson, and others who succeeded in deciphering the cuneiform in the 19th century. The Dutch scholarly world would, however, remain interested in ancient and modern languages of the Middle East. Language centers were founded at different universities and Dutch publishers were leaders in printing ancient Middle Eastern scripts. This interest in linguistics is also visible in the collection of the NMA. In the 19th century, numerous replicas of seals, reliefs, and tablets were acquired (see Figure 7.1). Under influence of the previously mentioned Böhl, original cuneiform tablets and bricks also arrived in the Netherlands in the early 20th century.

Other areas of Dutch interest visible in the collection history were flora and fauna, as well as items resembling military and political power. This last group can be viewed in every museum; archaeologists, historians, and the public are always intrigued by kings, queens, and soldiers. An object or monument that can be associated with royalty seems to be worth more than an object originating from a domestic space, even if it has the same aesthetic value. Royal objects are thus over-represented in every collection, and the NMA is no exception. Not only has the museum sought out the antiquity market looking for objects with a royal association, but it has also reached out to private Dutch collectors and researchers. Assyrian reliefs, Luristan swords, golden jewelry, and stone statues from their collections are visible in the renewed galleries, explaining the world of military and political power in the ancient Middle East.

A major part of the material in the collection arrived via excavations that were carried out as rescue work. In the 1970s and early 1980s, northern Syria hosted numerous international teams, including Dutch archaeologists, who were trying to rescue as much information and material as possible before the artificial Lake Assad was filled (Nieuwenhuyse 2014). The collection in the NMA was established through donations from the University of Amsterdam and Leiden University and has served museological as well as scientific purposes. Especially the Jebel Aruda material has been the focus of much research and is still an important Uruk collection far away from the homeland. In the permanent exhibition,

this rescue work forms the center of numerous associated topics like museum ethics and heritage management.

One of the questions visitors often ask is if the countries of origin would not like to have their possessions back. Indeed, many have tried to answer the question “Who owns the past?” (e.g., Robson et al. 2006). The answer to this question is complicated and the texts in this part of the permanent exhibit stimulate and provoke discussion among the visitors and between curators and the public. Museums have had a long tradition of obscuring the pedigree of their objects. They are scared of any restitution claims from Middle Eastern countries and have tried to cover up their collecting history. Furthermore, museums fear that heritage discussions will be used as political means of pressure and a way to grab media attention. Directly related to this issue are the problems of looting, illicit trade, and forgeries. Objects from northern and northwestern Iran (among them artifacts from Luristan) are presented as examples of these issues in the exhibition. The results of looting and the problem of selling objects on the antiquity market is not a problem from the past; satellite images still show new looting holes being dug on archaeological sites daily. Thousands of objects are separated yearly from their contexts, losing almost all of their scientific value. Antiquities fairs, auctions, but also smaller antiquity markets and internet platforms, are regularly selling objects without a good pedigree and without any context information. Visitors to the new gallery are triggered by the biased views of private collectors, museums, and heritage protectors (cf. Robson et al. 2006) and are stimulated to think about this subject.

### **Reception from visitors and the media**

There is no fixed routing in the new gallery (Figures 7.4 and 7.5). The audience can enjoy the individual masterpieces and read the information about the objects one by one, but can also experience the Dutch connection to the ancient Middle East. The advantage of this new arrangement is that we can show objects that were never exhibited before, independent of their individual aesthetic value.

The media reacted very positively to the renewed galleries: revolutionary, refreshing, a new museological way of thinking, a gallery that reads like a book. One of the journalist opens her article with the words “you need to have the guts” (Gelderlander, April 30, 2013) and another told the readers that the galleries are impressive, but you will not learn much about the history of the ancient Middle East (Quest Specials, May 31, 2013). Most of these comments are certainly stimulating for the museum staff, but the main objective of those galleries was to reach the audience. If a museum does not attract visitors, its work is like an unpublished excavation.

If we have to summarize all reactions, the conclusion would be that the renewal was received positively among visitors. They enjoy the serene atmosphere, the chosen layout, and the given space for the objects (Figure 7.5). People are intrigued by the objects that they had never seen before or the objects that they had not recognized in the overwhelming showcases of the previous galleries.





*Figure 7.5* Visitors can enjoy the serene atmosphere in the 2013 ancient Middle Eastern gallery in the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities

Courtesy of the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities

Nevertheless, the revolutionary concept of the gallery is often not recognized or valued by visitors. Complaints that can be heard are that if you want to know the whole story of the Dutch and the ancient Middle East, you have to read all text panels. This is indeed something no museum can demand from the visitor. People tend to first look at the objects and then search for more information on them, not vice versa. The reason why objects are exhibited in this specific way (for example, the Dutch preference for biblical objects) was not recognized immediately and this certainly flaws the message of the galleries.

## Conclusions

The new galleries have evoked numerous discussions, both among the museum staff and visitors. The audience is surprised by the new texts and the many connections between objects and Dutch scholars and diplomats. If museum galleries should be educative and provocative, the NMA did fulfill this task, more than a conventional ancient Middle Eastern exhibit. However, we did not realize that the audience is relatively conservative in how they want to see a permanent collection being displayed. In temporary exhibitions, the public seems to be more open to new concepts, objects, stories, ideas, and theories. They consider it an adventure and a way to learn something new and unexpected. Permanent galleries are viewed differently. First-time visitors, who might not think much about museums in their daily life, nevertheless have clear expectations, and returnees often have emotional reasons to come back and revisit—for example, objects that they find particularly intriguing or beautiful. All of them seem to look for

something that they are familiar with, something that does not immediately challenge their value systems (Marstine 2008:1). The renewed gallery at the NMA did not—at least at first sight—fulfill these expectations. Nowhere in the show are the words “cradle of civilization” used, Mesopotamia is not presented as the center of the ancient Middle Eastern world, and none of the showcases suggests a linear cultural progression. Whereas the culturally interested visitors are enjoying the galleries, those who rarely visit a museum only look at a few aesthetic inspiring objects, and do not notice the background story that it was brought to the museum by a famous Dutchman. These are the visitors who also complain about the absence of the “cradle of civilization” story.

One of the key questions that arose during the renewal of the galleries was whether curators should exhibit only topics and objects that the public wants to see. Although every show is variously perceived by the audience, the average visitor of permanent galleries in the NMA seems to look for a familiar story illustrated by numerous known and unknown, aesthetically pleasing objects. Does this mean that a curator should always think conventionally during the renewal of permanent ancient Middle Eastern galleries? No. Curators should certainly listen to the community, at least to some extent, but should always try to offer new levels of interests (cf. Zolberg 1996; Sandell 2002; Peers and Brown 2003:1).

The NMA chose to present a revolutionary new concept, commercially risking a decrease in visitor numbers and a negative media response. It was certainly not an experiment, but a careful decision based on the idea that galleries, and the meaning of their contents, should not be fixed and bounded, but contextual and contingent (Macdonald 2011:2–3). The new galleries were applauded by the audience and they did spark discussion, as was the intention.

The reception of researchers, academics, and students is different. They enjoy and appreciate scholarly endeavor in museums, probably even more than regular visitors. When museums do not focus on subjects that deepen scientific discussions, it is not uncommon that these scholars leave the building rather disappointed even though in-depth information about individual objects is presented (this is one of the reasons why tensions exist between university staff and museum curators).<sup>1</sup> The ideas used in the ancient Middle Eastern galleries of the NMA are certainly not considered new. Discussions about, for example, the validity of the “cradle of civilization” concept, about ethics of collecting, or about heritage protection are held regularly within academic circles. But narrowly focused university researchers are rarely obliged to put their research in a larger frame or to justify the existence of their fields. The NMA did both in the ancient Middle Eastern galleries.

In the new permanent galleries, I have tried to go beyond producing a beautiful show. In my mind, curating is not simply displaying objects or translating and exchanging knowledge, something you can learn from books. It goes decisively beyond the making of exhibitions. Like Martinon, I consider curating a practice that changes and develops constantly—a term that cannot be singularized or totalized (Martinon 2013:4) and a term that is defined, among other things, by the person who curates, time, place, and the way a curated product is perceived.



It is therefore essential that curatorial practice is discussed by curators as well as with visitors. And most important, museums should never consider permanent galleries really “permanent.”

In about 10 to 15 years the NMA will start thinking of redoing the ancient Middle Eastern galleries again. Let us see what the future brings

## Note

- 1 See Emberling and Petit, this volume.

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# 8 The Jordan Museum

## Storyteller of land and people

*Yosha Alamri and Jihad Kafafi*

### **Museum history**

The idea to establish a national museum of archaeology and history in Jordan goes back to the 1960s. The original intention was to replace the current Jordan Archaeological Museum with a new museum on the citadel. Later, a decision was made to dedicate the citadel museum as a museum for the Amman region. In 1989 a committee of concerned individuals, government officials, and university representatives formed the so-called “Society of Jordanian Culture” chaired by HRH Prince El Hassan. This society worked on a plan, elements of which were eventually adopted into the plan for the national museum. In December 1999 the Japanese government funded “The Tourism Sector Development Project,” aiming at the construction of a national museum of history and cultural heritage of Jordan following international modern standards.

King Abdullah II Ibn Al Hussein issued a royal decree on May 16, 2002, stating the establishment of a museum in Jordan named “The National Museum.” According to the Law of Antiquities, Article 31, the museum is a center for the kingdom’s historic, antique, and folklore properties, holding an esteemed status and having financial and administrative independence. On July 1, 2003, His Majesty also accredited the national museum by law. The governing board of trustees, chaired by HM Queen Rania Al-Abdullah, held its first meeting on January 12, 2005, and on October 2 of the same year, she laid the cornerstone of the museum, called the Jordan Museum, designed by Jordanian architect Jafar Tukan (Figure 8.1). The ground-floor galleries of the museum were opened by HRH Princess Sumaya bint El Hassan eight years later. Jordanian archaeologists (Curators of the Jordan Museum) and colleagues from Jordan and abroad collaborated in designing and putting together the story of Jordan.

### **Museum’s aims, amenities and visitors**

The Jordan Museum is a national institution that aims at the preservation and presentation of Jordan’s rich cultural heritage. It aims to attract both Jordanians and visitors from abroad. It aspires to be a vibrant and modern storyteller and a center to create and share knowledge in an engaging and stimulating way.



Figure 8.1 The Jordan Museum located in downtown Amman

Courtesy of the Jordan Museum

This knowledge is continually deepened by ongoing research by all staff members and in all areas of the museum, from gallery exhibitions to conservation and education departments.

The museum's facilities include conservation laboratories and workshop, a research library, photography studio, and a large storage area for archaeological and folklore objects. Facilities open to the public are a seminar hall, a children's activities area called Makany ("my place"), large open courtyards and—in the near future—a restaurant and gift shop. Several of the rooms can be rented for special events.

The Jordan Museum receives around 19,000–25,000 visitors annually. More than 100,000 visitors have enjoyed the public galleries on the first floor since January 2013 (Figure 8.2). This number includes all the visitors from Jordan and other countries. More than 45% of visitors are Jordanians, including students.

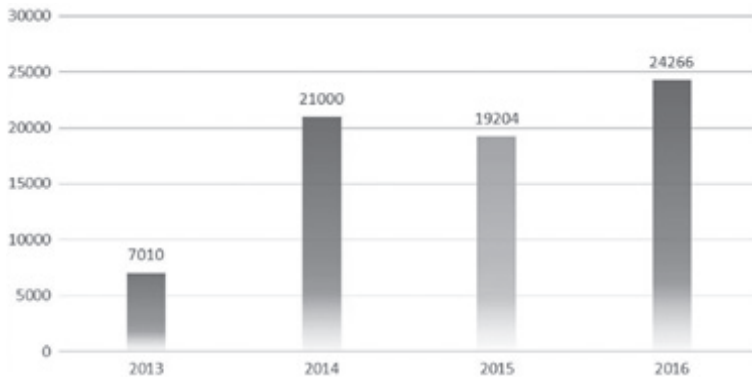


Figure 8.2 Number of visitors in the Jordan Museum in the past four years

Courtesy of the Jordan Museum

### Concept of the permanent galleries

The general concept of the permanent galleries is “A Story of Jordan: Land and People,” from the Paleolithic to modern times. It covers approximately 1.5 million years of history and archaeology. Currently only the ground floor is accessible to the public; it presents remains from the Paleolithic up to the end of the Classical period, just before the Muslim conquests (Figure 8.3).

The permanent galleries are developed as a place to enjoy learning as well as communication. Two main exhibition layers are used in the galleries: A chronological one that tells the story of Jordan through nine main themes, namely environment, food, art, cultural interaction, politics, industry, communication, and daily life. And, within these chronologically ordered galleries, there are “one-to-one theaters,” which are small thematic exhibits that complement the chronological timeline. These are the main interactive spaces in the museum.

In the galleries, objects are not displayed as *objets d’art* but are regarded as words in a story (of course these “words” have to be presented attractively to make the story more appealing). Objects within each gallery are contextualized, grouped, and presented in accordance to a specific theme. A main consideration is size, which is crucial when presenting ancient remains, for example, to young children. While plans and maps are used to convey large structures, all physical reconstructions are presented on a 1:1 scale. This implies that most of



Figure 8.3 Plan of the permanent galleries on the ground floor

Courtesy of the Jordan Museum

the structures and features cannot be fully recreated in the museum due to space constraints. The focus is placed on parts of the structures that cannot be seen anymore today.

In order to interact with the public, the Jordan Museum uses devices and audio-visual displays in all galleries. The topics vary from pottery handling, in order to understand how archaeologists use sherds for dating, to mineral identification, to elaborate computer programs that allow you to dress up a resident of Amman during different time periods, or writing your name in Aramaic, Nabataean, Greek, or Arabic.

## **Organization of the permanent galleries**

The ground floor is divided into three main time periods: prehistory, Historical Ages, and Classical periods. Before the visitors dive into the history of land and people, they are informed about the work of the archaeologist and especially about the soils where the artifacts in the museum galleries come from.

### ***Prehistory***

The oldest evidence of human presence in Jordan dates back to the Paleolithic period (around 1.5 million–21,000 BCE). These early humans reached Jordan from Africa, and humans would continue to cross Jordan on their way to Asia and Europe. At the Jordan Museum, the audience is informed that the Jordanian desert was green enough to support large animals such as the rhinoceros. Important objects exhibited are flint tools and three stone slabs bearing a repeated array of concentric irregular square decoration found at Wadi al-Hammeh 27. Other than being the earliest known large-scale sculpted piece in the Middle East, this is one of the best examples of non-figurative art from the Natufian period, around 12,000 BCE.

The Epi-Paleolithic period (21,000–10,200 BCE) is characterized by the transition from a hunter-gatherer way of life towards a more complex society with larger settlements. The first animals were domesticated and artistic crafts developed. In the gallery, the visitor will experience a reconstruction of Jordan's earliest shelter from Wadi al-Hammeh and the oldest monumental sculpture in the southern Levant. Furthermore, a detailed reconstruction of a 17,000-year-old burial found in the Petra area is exhibited. This male hunter between 35 and 55 years old was buried with a stone bowl and a large flint knife. An oval hole was cut into his skull after he died. The audience is motivated to think about a possible explanation for this post-mortem cut since it is still debated by scholars.

During the Neolithic period (ca. 10,200–5000 BCE), the inhabitants of Jordan began to lead increasingly settled lives, as is visible at the famous village of 'Ayn Ghazal, near Amman. The audience can be astonished by the world's first large-scale statues of a human form, displayed in a special room with spotlights on the masterpieces (Figure 8.4). The exact function of these statues is still not clear. They may have represented ancestors, as their burial manner was similar to the



Figure 8.4 The 'Ayn Ghazal statues, the world's first large-scale human statues (more than 9,000 years old) are displayed in their own space

Courtesy of the Jordan Museum

way the dead were buried, or they may have been mythical figures, responsible for life and fertility. Beside fragments of a plaster painting from the Petra area, the gallery also presents plastered human skulls from Jericho. These skulls played an important role in an ancestral cult and were found within the houses.

The Chalcolithic (ca. 5000–3600 BCE) literally means the “Copper-Stone Age,” and the gallery shows two of the most important sites that provide evidence for the development of copper technology in Jordan: al-Maqass and Hujayrat al-Ghuzlan. Nevertheless, wall paintings from Tulaylat al-Ghassul at the northeastern tip of the Dead Sea attract the most attention. Some of the earliest known large wall paintings, they depict a ritual procession and full-length human figures with decorated costumes.

Before visitors enter History, special attention is paid to nomadism. Everybody should realize that not all people became farmers or domesticated plants and animals. This theater, where you can relax under a starry night sky before continuing your exploratory journey through the museum, is an interactive space with emphasis on interpretation and guest participation. They incorporate the “please touch” concept, as opposed to the “no touch” in the other galleries.

### ***The Historical Ages***

The Bronze Ages, dated to ca. 3600–1200 BCE, are distinguished by major human achievements, such as the introduction of metal tools, the introduction of the wheel, and the rise of new urban centers. In this gallery, visitors can see a

reconstruction of the city gate of Jawa in the far north of Jordan and find out how the wheel affected pottery production, why bronze ingots from Wadi Faynan in southern Jordan were extensively traded, and what an Egyptianized ivory box is doing in the northern Jordan Valley.

The Iron Ages (1200–332 BCE) are well known from a variety of written sources. But in addition, archaeological sources reveal important evidence, for example about the retreat of Egyptian power, the emergence of kingdoms, and cultic and economic developments. Writing became quite common in ancient Jordan and the gallery presents many inscriptions, seals, and scarabs. The gallery offers information on one of Jordan's oldest historical records: the stele of Mesha, the king of Moab. Other royal objects are the statue of an Ammonite king and the Tell Siran bronze bottle found on the grounds of the University of Jordan. The popularity of Aramaic during the Iron Age is shown by the so-called Balaam text, found in the Jordan Valley in the 1960s, which reveals a remarkable similarity with a biblical narrative.

After the Historical Ages, containing many objects with script, the so-called “Writing Theater” summarizes the development of languages and script used in the ancient Middle East. The visitor can get a printed souvenir of his or her name written in Jordan's four historically “official” scripts: Aramaic, Nabataean, Greek, and Arabic.

### ***The Classical periods***

The third and last part of the Jordan Museum starts with the Hellenistic period (332–363 BCE) and the victory of Alexander the Great over the Persian King Darius. The hall is marked by a large wall relief of the impressive Qasr al-‘Abd, a palace to the west of Amman—or as it was called, “Philadelphia”—built with mega stone blocks and adorned with sculptures of large felines. The audience can also see the first coins that became widely circulated in Jordan, replacing the earlier barter system.

The Nabataean culture (312 BCE to around 500 CE) is especially known by its capital, Petra. It was Aretas I who became the first king of these former nomads, and during the next centuries the city grew out to become a center of the ancient Middle East. The audience gets to know the Nabataeans by their distinctive art, architecture, and writings. Even though the Roman emperor Trajan annexed the Nabataean kingdom into the “Provincia Arabia” of the Roman Empire in 106 CE, the Nabataean culture continued, as is shown by the reconstruction of part of the amazing façade of the Khirbet adh-Dharih temple just north of Tafila. The style of the sculptures indicates how openly the Nabataeans embraced all their neighboring cultures. The gallery furthermore presents the fine Nabatean pottery and explains how the Nabateans sculpted Petra's monuments.

Around 63 BCE, the Roman Empire occupied the regions northwest of the Nabataean Kingdom. Similar to the previous Hellenistic kingdoms, the Roman presence was not only military but also cultural, and the spread of the Greco-Roman culture resulted in a fusion of the local and incoming cultural elements.





*Figure 8.5* The Dead Sea Scrolls displayed at the Jordan Museum, in which you can see not only some of the documents written on parchment and papyrus, but also the one and only Copper Scroll

Courtesy of the Jordan Museum

This is best illustrated in the League of the Decapolis, ten cities founded soon after the Roman invasion. In the exhibition gallery, the audience can see impressive marble statues and learn how engineers were able to build large buildings, monuments, and streets.

The Byzantine period (324–636 CE) in Jordan started when Christianity was adopted as the official state religion. In this period, the population increased enormously due to a wealthy and flourishing economy. Visitors can experience this prosperity by the reconstruction of a lavishly decorated part of a church found in Petra, a city that continued to flourish, as is also indicated by the Petra Church Papyri. This private archive conveys a rather unexpected impression of Petra in the 6th century CE.

The world-famous Dead Sea Scrolls have their own climate-controlled room at the Jordan Museum, in which you can see not only some of the documents written on parchment and papyrus, but also the one and only Copper Scroll (Figure 8.5). This object is made of 99% copper metal and dates from the 1st century CE.

### **The museum collection**

The museum collection contains more than 3,000 objects from all time periods and regions of Jordan. All objects, including the masterpieces, are on loan from the Department of Antiquities. The collection of the Jordan Museum is divided into the exhibited and the stored objects. Those in the storage rooms are used for temporary exhibitions, as well as for rotation purposes in the permanent displays.



Figure 8.6 Storage of the Jordan Museum follows the most recent developments in museology

Courtesy of the Jordan Museum

These objects are organized by physical material in order to guarantee conservation. The museum storage, with a total size of more than 2,000 square meters, has been equipped with modern systems to maintain a suitable environment for museum collections, to extinguish fires inside the warehouse, and to protect and secure stored artifacts from damage and theft (Figure 8.6). As a result of these investments, many foreign expeditions have asked to keep sensitive artifacts, discovered during excavations, in the Jordan Museum.

### **The documentation system**

The Jordan Museum is using the museum software called Adlib for recording and managing the museum's collections data. The software is adapted to the museum's requirements. The main search engine, for example, is divided into archaeological and non-archaeological data, and there are specific access points for each screen to start from. It offers different effective search tools, such as the simple search wizard and the combine search queries. Information on the objects can be entered and edited easily. It is not only a collection catalog, but it also contains all museum works such as extended information on objects, images, and conservation work.

### **Temporary exhibitions**

Temporary exhibitions are occasionally held in a special room on the second floor. In the past years, the following shows were held in The Jordan Museum.

***The Umayyad mosaics of the Dome of the Rock come closer***

The Jordan Museum and the Mosaic Center in Jericho held an exhibition entitled “The Umayyad Mosaics of the Dome of the Rock Come Closer.” This show ran from October 30 until November 21, 2010. It contained several full-scale replicas of the Umayyad mosaics of the Dome of the Rock, using the same colors, materials, and techniques as the originals. The exhibition highlighted the Hashemite restorations of the Islamic monuments in Jerusalem, which played a vital role in the conservation of these holy monuments.

***Petra, desert wonder***

To celebrate the 200th anniversary of Petra’s discovery, the exhibition “Petra, Desert Wonder” was opened in the Jordan Museum on July 17, 2014, and continued for almost one year. The exhibition took its visitors on a journey to the most beautiful and impressive monuments and objects of Petra. It is worth mentioning that this exhibition was first organized in the Antikenmuseum Basel und Sammlung Ludwig in Switzerland from October 23, 2012, until March 17, 2013. It then moved to the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities at Leiden (October 9, 2013 to March 23, 2014).

***The Great Arab Revolt***

The exhibition “The Great Arab Revolt” was organized to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Great Arab Revolt. It opened its doors on September 27, 2016, and lasted until January 30, 2017. The exhibition narrates the story of the Great Arab Revolt from a socio-historical perspective, by matching tangible evidence such as photographs with historic and local community narratives, thus expanding and better facilitating our understanding of this historical event in an array of topics. Moreover, the exhibition tackles the many contributions of the Great Arab Revolt in stimulating unity in Jordan and establishing further development, growth, and prosperity.

The Jordan Museum has published books on two of its special exhibits (the Umayyad Mosaics and Petra). Both catalogs are in the Arabic and English languages.

**Conclusion**

The Jordan Museum opened its doors in 2013 and has functioned since then as the national museum of archaeology and history of Jordan. Visitors experience a comprehensive history of Jordan, whereas previously they had to hop between local museums. The galleries at the Jordan Museum were designed as stimulating learning centers around the most important highlights of Jordan, all chronologically ordered. It is clearly a national museum, in which national values and identity are visible.

The curatorial work isn't limited to highlighting national values—we also put these highlights in a regional and interregional context. Education and learning are important at all stages of the exhibits and visitors have received this approach positively. Nevertheless, most of the visitors seem to experience a visit to the Jordan Museum as a leisure activity rather than a learning experience. One should be aware that more than other museums, our audience differs enormously, from Western tourists focusing on Petra to primary school kids learning about the history of Jordan. Our visitors experience the exhibits in their own way, walking from one highlight to the other, even if they do not read all text panels or use all the interactive displays. They mostly seem to be pleased with the varied stories and objects presented throughout the museum. Some objects tell an interesting story of their own, while others need context to get the attention of visitors. Thus, the Jordan Museum, although a national museum focusing on national values, displays objects (and history) in ways found in archaeological museums in other contexts.



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## Part III

# Perspectives from art museums



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## 9 Exhibiting interaction

### Displaying the arts of the ancient Middle East in their broader context

*Joan Aruz and Yelena Rakic*

#### Introduction

The Metropolitan Museum of Art was founded on April 13, 1870, “to be located in the City of New York, for the purpose of establishing and maintaining in said city a Museum and library of art, of encouraging and developing the study of the fine arts, and the application of arts to manufacture and practical life, of advancing the general knowledge of kindred subjects, and, to that end, of furnishing popular instruction” (Charter of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, State of New York, Laws of 1870, chapter 197, passed April 13, 1870, and amended L.1898, chapter 34; L. 1908, chapter 219; <http://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met>, accessed July 2, 2018). As the story goes, it was a group of Americans gathered in 1866 in Paris, France, who first agreed to create a “national institution and gallery of art” to bring art and art education to the American people, and over the next few years, civic leaders, businessmen, artists, art collectors, and philanthropists rallied to this cause. The Legislature of the State of New York granted an act of incorporation that formally established The Metropolitan Museum of Art, which opened to the public in the Dodworth Building at 681 Fifth Avenue in 1870. Ten years later, after a brief move to downtown New York, the museum opened at its current site on Fifth Avenue and 82nd Street. It has since expanded greatly, and the various additions—built as early as 1888—now completely surround the original structure (Tomkins 1989).

The building is not all that has grown. In 1897, the museum had just over 900,000 visitors; in 2016, the museum had 6.7 million visitors, and today it includes more than 1.5 million works of art collected in 17 curatorial departments. The Metropolitan is routinely described as one of the great encyclopedic museums in the world and the breadth and scope of its collections reflect this characterization. As an institution, it now makes direct reference to its intent to be all-encompassing in its collecting practices. In 2015 the following statement of mission was drafted, intended to supplement earlier statements of purpose: “The Metropolitan Museum of Art collects, studies, conserves, and presents significant works of art across all times and cultures in order to connect people to creativity, knowledge, and ideas” (<http://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met>, accessed October 21, 2016).



In the approach to its earliest acquisitions, it is clear that a wide net was cast from the start. This is evident from The Metropolitan's first acquisition on November 20, 1870: not a European painting, but a Roman sarcophagus. Soon after, the famed Cesnola Collection, formed by General Luigi Palma di Cesnola in Cyprus, where he had served as an American consul, was acquired by the Museum between 1874 and 1876 (Karageorghis 2000). These eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern antiquities dating from the Bronze Age to the end of the Roman period are further evidence of an interest in the foundations of Western civilization. Furthermore, the first scholars hired as curators also had ties to the ancient world. In 1886 William Goodyear, an archaeologist and art historian, was placed in charge of the Department of Paintings, and Isaac H. Hall, a Syriac and Greek scholar, was appointed curator of the Department of Sculpture and was also in charge of the Department of Casts—a collection being assembled to illustrate the progress and development of art.

By the time the museum opened its doors on Fifth Avenue in 1880, just a few decades after the decipherment of the cuneiform script, Mesopotamian clay documents and other objects—part of the Cesnola Collection—were already in its inventory. Cuneiform tablets, including two clay cylinders bearing inscriptions of Nebuchadnezzar, were purchased in 1879 from a dealer in London, the first such collection to enter an American museum. Their acquisition enhanced the reputation of The Metropolitan as a serious, scholarly institution. The museum's holdings were further enriched by the purchase of a much larger group of seals and tablets from the Reverend William Hayes Ward who, under the aegis of the Archaeological Institute of America, led the Catharine Lorillard Wolfe exploratory expedition to Babylonia in 1884. This was also the year in which the first Assyrian relief entered the museum's collection—to be followed in 1917 and 1932 by substantial gifts of these monumental architectural sculptures that had adorned the palace of the Assyrian King Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE) at Nimrud. The group, gifted by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., had been shipped to England in the 1850s by Austen Henry Layard, and installed in a specially constructed porch built at Canford Manor in Dorset, England, the home of Lady Charlotte Guest, who was a cousin and supporter of Layard (Russell 1997).

The Assyrian reliefs stimulated other acquisitions in the pre-Islamic Middle Eastern field and in part led to the creation in 1932 of the Department of Near Eastern Art—encompassing both ancient and Islamic phases of art history. Around the same time, The Metropolitan's interest in Middle Eastern archaeology was initiated with its participation in the excavations at the Parthian and Sasanian site of Ctesiphon. The 1931–2 expedition was organized jointly with the German State Museums and created a model that persisted for many decades during the era of “partage,” where the department was represented in the field by curatorial staff and provided funding, receiving in return a portion of the finds. The collection grew through participation in excavations, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, at sites such as Nimrud, Nippur, and Hasanlu, to name a few, and the department's archaeological involvement survived the changes to the antiquities laws that no longer support the transfer of objects to foreign lands

reflecting The Metropolitan's strong commitment to archaeological exploration (Rakic 2010). It was only in 1956 and again in 1963 that the collections were divided into the two separate departments—the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art and Department of Islamic Art—that still exist in the present day.<sup>1</sup> Today, the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art includes nearly 7,000 works that range in date from the 8th millennium BCE to the 9th century CE, and come from a vast region centered in Mesopotamia, extending north to the Caucasus and the Eurasian steppes; south to the Arabian Peninsula; west to Anatolia, Syria, and the Levant, bordered by the Mediterranean Sea; and east through Iran and western Central Asia, with connections as far as the Indus River Valley. These objects have been acquired by The Metropolitan by gift, by purchase, and through participation in archaeological excavations, and are today on exhibition in the galleries of Ancient Near Eastern Art on the second floor of the museum.<sup>2</sup> Of course, this has not always been their location.

Shortly after their arrival at The Metropolitan in 1933, the Assyrian sculptures were installed in a prominent position at the south end of the Great Hall. This display marked a turning point in the presentation of the arts that formed the foundation of Western civilization—with human-headed bull and lion colossal gateway figures (*lamassu*) installed next to a cast of the Olympian Apollo (Figure 9.1). These Assyrian sculptures were thus exhibited not as pieces of biblical history, as they had often been interpreted, but rather, in the words of the



Figure 9.1 View of installation of Assyrian sculpture in the Great Hall, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1933

Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

museum's director Herbert Winlock, as "a branch on the family tree of our art and our culture" (Winlock 1933:18).

A more contemporary and nuanced view of connecting cultures was expressed by the historian Jerry Bentley in 2006: "Networks of cross-cultural interaction, communication, and exchange are defining contexts of human historical experience just as surely as are the myriad ostensibly distinct societies.... Thus, attention to processes of cross-cultural interaction is quite simply indispensable for purposes of understanding the trajectories of individual societies and the development of the larger world as a whole" (Bentley 2006:26). Similar sentiments were expressed by Neil MacGregor, in a conference on the Universal Museum at the British Museum. He explained that the purpose of the British Museum's mandate to bring "objects together was not that they should simply be seen as objects, but that the contact between them, and the contrasts between them, would generate knowledge" (MacGregor 2004:20). The Metropolitan's director at that time, Philippe de Montebello, enthused that one could "traverse one gallery to another to see the distinctions as well as the similarities" (de Montebello 2004:19). Indeed, while the broad character of civilizations can be experienced in this way, it has been a challenge—both in creating displays in the permanent galleries as well as in crafting temporary exhibitions—to illuminate these connections, if not for direct comparisons and juxtapositions. To elucidate the relationships among contemporary cultures, which in some instances actually shaped their development, poses enormous challenges even in encyclopedic museums whose internal geography divides civilizations from one another by staircases and grand hallways.

Despite these challenges, it is exactly this premise which has informed the present display of the permanent collection of ancient Middle Eastern art at The Metropolitan. After their presentation in the Great Hall and a subsequent move to the back of the Egyptian galleries in the 1950s, many objects (including the Assyrian reliefs) were taken off view and placed in storage for over a decade, to be displayed once again in the last major reinstallation of the collection in the early 1980s. While the galleries of the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art are today situated in the same space on the museum's second floor and use the same configuration as at that time, they were modified during a reorganization of the collection, which opened in 1999. After much discussion among the curatorial staff, it was decided that a chronological approach would be combined with one that would broaden the visitor's perspective on the developments across western and Central Asia in each time frame—while adding related materials from Egypt, Cyprus, and the Aegean as well as the Indus Valley, when particularly appropriate. For example, the visitor is able to view the arts of 3rd-millennium Mesopotamia, Syria-Levant, and Iran, against the background of the arts of surrounding regions extending eastward to Bactria-Margiana and the Indus site of Chanhudaro (a significant long-term loan from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, allowing this). In another section of the galleries, devoted to the early 2nd millennium BCE, it was important to emphasize that the Achemhöyük ivories, discovered in the middle of central Anatolia, cannot be understood properly



Figure 9.2 View of galleries of Ancient Near Eastern Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016

Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

without allusion to the art of Egypt during the Assyrian Trading Colony period—also represented by a collection of tablets and sealed envelopes from an earlier phase at Kültepe (Figure 9.2).

What can be done only in a limited way in the permanent collection—because of the constraints already mentioned—was realized more fully in three special exhibitions, “Art of the First Cities: The Third Millennium BC from the Mediterranean to the Indus” in 2003 (Aruz et al. 2003), “Beyond Babylon: Art, Trade and Diplomacy in the Second Millennium BC” in 2008 (Aruz et al. 2008), and “Assyria to Iberia at the Dawn of the Classical Age” in 2014 (Aruz et al. 2014). These shows were a departure—exploring a period of time over a vast geographic spectrum, rather than taking the more conventional approach of isolating a specific ancient region, city, or modern country in a specific period or over time. Such exhibitions had been mounted—both in 1992 and 1995—focused on the cities of Susa (Harper et al. 1992) and Assur (Harper et al. 1995) and included spectacular works of art in relative isolation from the events surrounding them.<sup>3</sup>

The new “intercultural” approach to special exhibitions arose in the late 1990s in part as a response to The Metropolitan’s director’s interest in celebrating the advent of the new millennium. An exhibition mounted in 2000 celebrated “The Year One,” with contributions from numerous departments in the museum from Asia to the Americas. Following this, a proposal to explore the “Art of the First Cities,” encompassing the 4th–3rd millennium BCE from the Mediterranean to the Indus, came to fruition in 2003. The show had a

special resonance in New York—arguably the most intensely urban environment in the world, overcoming to some degree one of the challenges often faced: the disassociation of our public from the significance and relevance of the ancient past. The exhibition focused on the first instances in which early cultures coalesced into cities and then states, heightening awareness of foundations upon which all succeeding societies were built. While one dimension of the show emphasized the great leaps forward during this seminal period in world civilization, yet another, revealed by its subtitle—“From the Mediterranean to the Indus”—truly made it unique, as these phenomena were explored not only in Mesopotamia but also across the vast expanse of Asia. The aim was to demonstrate that cultural interaction was an essential factor in understanding the great advances represented by Mesopotamian civilization (Aruz et al. 2003).

The challenges in mounting “Art of the First Cities” and its two successor exhibitions were enormous, with loans from countries as diverse as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Greece, Cyprus, Israel, Italy, Spain, Georgia, and Armenia—lands rich in resources, but often also rich in restrictions and requirements for such exchanges. But beyond logistics, not to mention war and politics, which took their toll on the shows, the greatest challenges came at the beginning—with the need to create conceptual frameworks in which the interrelations among cultures and ensuing advances in art and thought would be epitomized by the display of works of art.

While the Early Bronze Age was the backdrop for “Art of the First Cities,” the next exhibition, “Beyond Babylon,” focused on the Middle and Late Bronze Age—a time during which the ancient Middle East witnessed a drastic shift from a Mesopotamia-centric world to one in which the expansion for resources and corridors for trade created major centers in central Anatolia, on the Euphrates, and further west along the Mediterranean coast (Aruz et al. 2008). The quest for metals was the driving force in this age of intensive trade and communication, which carried not only foreign raw materials and manufactured goods over long distances, but also created an era in which travelers shared new discoveries and innovative technologies, their interaction fostering a brilliant period in the arts with the creation of international styles that combined elements from a variety of cultures. The task was to select the compelling works of art that visually manifested the various facets of this intense interaction and the period’s extraordinary openness to foreign imagery. Attention was focused on the royal sphere, as well as on shared practices such as bull-leaping—perhaps spread by traveling acrobats as well as other specialists mentioned in the texts, such as musicians, doctors, and priests, as well as craftsmen. One transformative discovery formed the centerpiece of the show—the extraordinary finds of raw and finished materials from the wreckage of the oldest known seagoing ship discovered off the grand promontory or Uluburun on Turkey’s southern shore (Figure 9.3). The goods from the wreck were surrounded in the galleries by the cultures represented by the club of great powers alluded to in the Amarna Letters: Hittite Anatolia, Assyria, Mitanni, and Egypt, and we also devoted a gallery to the fruits of interaction—with such

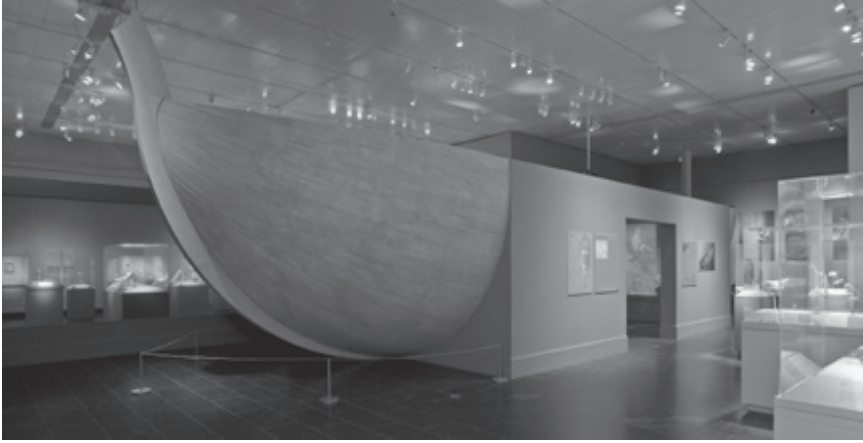


Figure 9.3 View of gallery in the exhibition “Beyond Babylon: Art, Trade, and Diplomacy in the Second Millennium B.C.,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008

Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

objects as the Theban seals and ivory and gold from Ugarit and the gold from the tombs of the foreign wives of Tuthmosis III.

The precious cargo on the Uluburun ship, which fed the complex diplomatic and commercial enterprises developing among the great powers of the era, forecast the explosion of Mediterranean trade in later Phoenician times. The complexity of interactions that occurred across the Mediterranean in the wake of the collapse of the Bronze Age palaces and the creation of a new order—when merchants of the seas navigated the farthest reaches of the Mediterranean in search of metals in the context of the enveloping power of the Assyrians—was the setting for “Assyria to Iberia at the Dawn of the Classical Age.” In this exhibition, the deep roots of interaction between the ancient Middle East and the lands along the shores of the Mediterranean and their impact on the artistic traditions that developed in the region were explored through works of art created literally from Western Asia to Spain (Aruz et al. 2014).

After an introduction devoted to the transition from Bronze to Iron and the sources—biblical, Classical, and Mesopotamian—for the history of the Iron Age, the Assyrian context was presented, in which phenomena such as the Phoenician expansion across the Mediterranean and the inception of the Orientalizing eras in Greece and Etruria occurred. Assyrian imperial art—large-scale reliefs—provided a backdrop for a selection of ivories representing the vast amounts of booty and tribute that flowed into Nimrud and the artistic ideas generated through contact. After exploring connections on the western Asiatic mainland, the exhibition was conceived as a journey across the Mediterranean, beginning on the Phoenician coast and on Cyprus, tracing networks of interaction and focusing on the imports and the inspiration for the onset of the “Orientalizing” era in both in





*Figure 9.4* View of gallery in the exhibition “Assyria to Iberia at the Dawn of the Classical Age,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2014

Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

the sanctuaries of Greece and the rich tombs of Etruria (Figure 9.4). Phoenician expansion to the western Mediterranean and beyond the Pillars of Hercules in search of metals was illustrated not only by objects found in trading outposts and colonies such as Carthage, Tharros on Sardinia, Cadiz and Huelva in Spain, but also by the discoveries in the wreckage of a Phoenician ship that sank off the coast of Cartagena. Among its cargo, excavated at Bajo de la Campana, were raw materials including more than 50 ivory tusks, a number inscribed with the names of Phoenician deities, and ingots of copper, tin, and lead ore, as well as manufactured goods.

In a way, with this approach these exhibitions recall an older age, one in which cultures were not artificially divided and studied separately—the benefits being a comprehensive picture, the challenge being to encompass the vast scholarship on individual regions while illustrating contacts by a highly selective choice of objects, ensuring the displays had depth as well as breadth.

Ultimately, successful museum displays, whether temporary or permanent, present an array of compelling objects in ways that evoke their original contexts while also connecting them to the human experience we all share. Methods and approaches have changed over time, along with departmental nomenclature—whether “ancient Near Eastern,” “Middle Eastern” or “western Asiatic”—reflecting scholarly trends that may be informed by other disciplines and by contemporary events. Yet the core challenge remains the same: to reveal the brilliant artistic achievements of the ancient past, originating and functioning

in a diverse set of circumstances over an expansive chronological and geographical range. Informed by advances in the study of texts and increased understanding of socio-political dynamics in antiquity and by recently applied theoretical frameworks, objects have been further enriched by new narratives. Looking to the future, it will be important to meld various approaches, both traditional and innovative, in order to enhance our ongoing relationships with our collections and the past civilizations that they represent.

## Notes

- 1 Harper 2001 provides the most recent review of the history of The Metropolitan's Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. Much of this history is linked with individuals who moved between departments. For example, Charles Wilkinson started as a member of the Egyptian Expedition in the Egyptian Art Department, then moved to the Persian Expedition in the Near Eastern Art Department, then Curator of Near Eastern Archaeology in Egyptian Art, then Curator in the Ancient Near Eastern Art Department, then Curator of the Near Eastern Art Department. It is less clear if collections moved so easily between museum departments.
- 2 Approximately 1,200 objects are on display, of which about 1,000 belong to the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art and 200 are loans.
- 3 Other special exhibitions since the 1990s include: "Art and Empire: Treasures from Assyria in The British Museum" (1995); "The Golden Deer of Eurasia: Scythian and Sarmatian Treasures from the Russian Steppes" (2000); "Afghanistan: Hidden Treasures from the National Museum, Kabul" (2009); and "The Cyrus Cylinder and Ancient Persia: Charting a New Empire" (2013).

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## 10 Negotiations in museum practice

### A reinstalled gallery of ancient Middle Eastern art at the Detroit Institute of Arts

*Swarupa Anila and Geoff Emberling*

We present here a discussion of our experiences working on one collaborative exhibit, the gallery of ancient Middle Eastern (AME) art (Figure 10.1) that opened at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) in October 2015 (see Stryker 2015, Hodges 2015), with Anila as Director of Interpretive Engagement and Emberling as Consulting Curator. For the purposes of this chapter, rather than describe all activities in the development of the DIA's AME gallery, we focus on moments of DIA process and practice that depart from typical museum practice and demonstrate notable innovation or challenge.

#### **Background: Museum and collections**

Founded in 1883, the Detroit Institute of Arts has one of the most important art collections in the United States with 65,000 objects from cultures around the world and from ancient to contemporary times. The central architecture



*Figure 10.1* The reinstalled ancient Middle East gallery at the Detroit Institute of Arts  
Courtesy of the Detroit Institute of Arts, 2015

of the current museum building was constructed in 1927. The additions of north and south wings in 1966 and 1971 and recent 2007 building renovations expanded the museum footprint to 658,000 square feet with 250,000 square feet for gallery displays. The museum hosts eight to twelve special temporary exhibitions annually and supports a statewide touring exhibition program. DIA-organized exhibitions produce scholarly catalogs, and original research on the DIA collection is published annually in the *DIA Bulletin*. Annual attendance over the past five years has averaged 650,000 visitors with 89–90% ranking their visit as highly satisfying and 90% likely to recommend the museum to others.

Strengths of the collection lie in African, American, 17th-century Dutch, European Renaissance, German Expressionist, and Native American art. The DIA's ancient Middle East collection—gathered almost entirely by purchase rather than through support of excavations—is good but not great, with some star pieces and many chronological and geographical gaps (Figure 10.2). The earliest acquisitions were made in 1890, with the accession of about 124 objects, mostly cylinder and stamp seals, from the collection of Frederick K. Stearns, a Detroit businessman who was a trustee of the Detroit Museum of Art (as the DIA was known then). Mr. Stearns had acquired these objects in part from collections obtained by others, including missionaries working in southeastern Turkey during the 1880s.

A group of 34 cuneiform tablets was accessioned in 1924 as a donation from Henry G. Stevens, also a trustee of the Museum. He had acquired them from Albert T. Clay, Professor of Assyriology at Yale University.

One of the highlights of the collection, a glazed brick *mushhushu*-dragon from the Ishtar Gate of Babylon (Figure 10.3), was excavated by the German project at Babylon in the years before World War I and was acquired by the DIA in 1931.

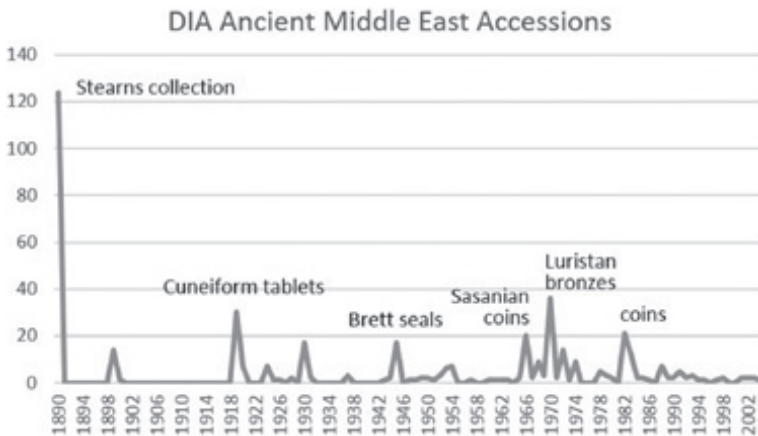


Figure 10.2 Acquisition history of ancient Middle East collection in the DIA



Figure 10.3 Glazed brick panel depicting the *mushhushshu*-dragon, symbol of the god Marduk from the Ishtar Gate at Babylon, ca. 600 BCE (DIA 31.25)

Courtesy of the Detroit Institute of Arts



Figure 10.4 Relief depicting the Assyrian king Tukul-apil-esharra III (DIA 50.32) from the Central Palace at Kalhu (modern Nimrud), ca. 730 BCE

Courtesy of the Detroit Institute of Arts

Many of the finest seals in the collection (see Figures 10.7 and 10.8) were purchased in 1945 from the collection of Agnes Baldwin Brett, which itself had previously been published (von der Osten 1936).

Another highlight of the collection is a stone relief (Figure 10.4) from the palace of the Assyrian King Tukul-apil-esharra III (more commonly known as Tiglath-pileser III) from his palace at Nimrud (ancient Kalhu). Excavated by the British archaeologist Austen Henry Layard in the 1840s, it was acquired by the DIA in 1950 (Robinson 1949–50).

The collection includes other important works. Four relief fragments from Persepolis were acquired in 1931 and in 1978–9 (E.H. Peck 2005). The authenticity of a supposed Gudea statue acquired in 1986 remains controversial (Hansen 1988; Muscarella 2005). The DIA continued to acquire objects by purchase and gift for its ancient Middle East collection under curators of Ancient Art William Peck and Elsie Holmes Peck until 2004, but has not actively collected since that time.

### **Background: Reinstallation project**

The DIA has become a leader in visitor-centered art museum exhibition development over the past 15 years. When now-retired director Graham Beal arrived at the DIA in 1999, he confronted declining visitorship in a declining city (Abt 2001). With an impending and necessary building renovation project on the horizon, Beal initiated a process of reinstalling the museum's permanent collection that involved major changes in exhibit practice. Foremost among them was the institution of exhibition teams, the establishment of one discipline (interpretation), and expansion of another (evaluation). The team-based process emphasizes interdisciplinarity and collaboration across all phases of work: concept development, design development, interpretive development, production, collections review, and installation.

While a team can include staff from various departments at various phases, its core requires a partnership between the curator and interpretive planner throughout the process. Curators are no longer the primary source for themes and concepts or for the writing of text panels. The curator brings information and research about the objects and collection and shepherds the appropriate display of objects. The interpretive planner brings research into visitor learning and innovative presentation of concepts through principles of experience design. Thus, what was previously considered curatorial content is shaped in the new process by interpretive staff to facilitate visitor understanding and engagement. The role of the team together is to mine the collection and subject matter to explore and deliver inventive combinations of objects and ideas that will intrigue visitors. To ensure visitor-centeredness, exhibit objects and themes, labels, videos, and hands-on interactives are tested with focus groups of visitors at several stages before gallery installation.

In 2007, the DIA opened its new building with the vast majority of its collections reinstalled through this process. A special issue of the journal *Curator: The Museum Journal* in 2009 included discussion and debate of the reinstallation from various museum professionals. The reviews ranged in enthusiasm, but all agreed that the work was groundbreaking as a museum-wide test case for visitor-centered practice. In subsequent years, evidence of the museum's success would become clear. An IMLS-funded series of summative evaluations completed in 2013 measured the effectiveness of the DIA's interpretive approaches in meeting visitor needs and achieving the museum's mission: "helping each visitor find personal meaning in art." Findings from three different evaluation firms concluded that:

- the majority of visitors do find personal meaning through art, with many visitors finding ways to connect ideas and/or art to their own lives and interests;
- visitors frequently comment on how interpretation contributed to their understanding and appreciation of ideas related to the art and prompted them to look closely at the art and notice details they would otherwise have missed;
- the effectiveness of interpretive strategies is less about the format (label, booklet, video, etc.) and more about the consistent selection of content visitors find helpful for making connections, making sense, and feeling the information was meant for them (Detroit Institute of Arts et al. 2012, Detroit Institute of Arts and Adams 2012).

In addition, events of the past several years have demonstrated the remarkable impact of the DIA's visitor-centered approaches. The reinstallation revitalized visitorship and in 2012, voters in surrounding counties agreed to a tax increase to support over \$20 million in annual museum revenues for a 10-year period beginning in 2012 (Cooper 2012). And despite media coverage about the possible sale of the museum's collection in the context of the City of Detroit's bankruptcy, the museum's collection was saved from sale by the so-called "Grand Bargain" in which the DIA, foundations, and the State of Michigan pledged funds to the city pension to secure ownership of the collection from the City of Detroit and for the public trust (Rhodes 2014).

### **Developing the ancient Middle East gallery**

With good evidence for the strength of the DIA's approaches to the 2007 reinstallation, visitor-centered interpretive development processes continued for exhibitions and subsequent permanent collections reinstallations. While most of the DIA's collection was reinstalled in 2007, the ancient Middle East collection and a handful of others had to be scheduled for subsequent years.

Prior to the addition of the DIA's south wing in 1966, ancient Middle Eastern material was included in one small gallery with ancient Egyptian objects (Figure 10.5). From 1966 to 2004, the ancient Middle East collection was installed in a suite of galleries of ancient material organized geographically: one gallery was dedicated to Mesopotamia and Anatolia, and another gallery for Persia, South Arabia, Palestine, and Egypt.<sup>1</sup>

When planning for the AME reinstallation began in 2012, the project team had summative evaluations, processes, and practices from the 2007 reinstallation to lay the groundwork for the new project.

The gallery development process began in the concept phase with the curator reviewing and presenting the collection to other members of the exhibit team and providing historical context for the objects. During this phase, the team worked toward what the museum exhibit writer Beverly Serrell (2015) calls the "Big Idea"—a single statement for the gallery that is clear, engaging, and resonant and fits the objects being displayed. The Big Idea facilitates final object



*Figure 10.5* The Ancient Middle East installation at the Detroit Institute of Arts, 1948 (Gallery 19)

Courtesy of the Detroit Institute of Arts

selection, organization of the space in the gallery, and writing of wall panels and object labels. While focusing the narrative in the gallery, the Big Idea also entails leaving many stories out in the interest of helping visitors understand and engage with the display.

In addition, the team developed visitor outcomes for the project to serve as goals for visitor experiences of the installation. For AME, the team arrived at four primary outcomes. Visitors would:

- feel awe at the human ingenuity used to create these objects,
- find connections to people of the ancient Middle East,
- deepen their understanding of the rich histories associated with the contemporary Middle East, and
- think in new ways about how art functions in societies, including their own.

These are not information-based outcomes—the goal was not for visitors to know the chronological order of empires or the regnal dates of Assyrian kings, for example. Rather, they are experiential outcomes that emphasize discovery, connection, and relevance. These visitor outcomes informed the design of interpretive planning and, most importantly, served as measures for visitor evaluation throughout development.





Figure 10.6 Word cloud of perceptions of the ancient Middle East by DIA staff and general public

In preparation for the work to develop conceptual frameworks, we sent a simple question out on the museum's Facebook page asking, "When you think of the ancient Middle East, what comes to mind?" From about 100 responses, combined with those from internal staff, we created a word cloud (Figure 10.6) that gave us information about big concepts and themes that might serve as starting points with visitors. The same question was put to the focus groups, allowing us to aggregate interesting consistencies and divergences. This exercise gave us a sense of expectations and assumptions ahead of our planning meetings.

On a separate track, the curator reviewed the museum's collection and identified 16 possible themes or groupings for discussion, including landscape and environment, prehistory, regional traditions, kingship and empire in Assyria, Iron Age Iran, city gods of Babylon, and the Persian Empire. Some of these themes represented strengths of the collection and could be demonstrated with a good number and range of objects. Others were object-weak. Initially, the curator's assumption was that the gallery would be organized chronologically and geographically and that text and photos would bridge the gaps in the collection. As a matter of personal and perhaps disciplinary preference, he prioritized narrative over the objects themselves. Unbeknownst to him, this presented two challenges to DIA's practices. First, as an art museum, the DIA emphasizes objects and their making. The question the DIA seeks to answer with its displays of permanent collection objects is not, "What narratives can we tell and how do the objects fit in?" Rather, the DIA starts with the objects; the team explores stories and ideas that emerge out of objects or combinations of objects available to us. If, for instance, the DIA tried to represent major ancient cultures of the region such as Sumer, Babylon, Assyria, Persia, the installations for each would be wildly uneven in number, scale, and variety of objects.

The second challenge falls in the realm of visitor engagement. For visitors to draw meaning from chronological and geographical approaches, they would need baseline familiarity and understanding of the subject matter. This would be an uphill battle for this installation; the geographies and cultures of the ancient world bear little resemblance to those of the contemporary Middle East, and the DIA's collection spans 8,000 years and more than a dozen ancient cultures. We had to find ways to make this collection accessible to visitors by finding resonant, perhaps humanist and theme-based connections to close gaps between unfamiliar cultures, distanced not just by geography but also by time.



During the team's review of the collection, the curator proposed ways that the objects could be seen as important, interesting, and relevant to various historical and technological narratives. Other members of the team found these stories alternately interesting and inexpressibly dull.

To find the ideas that could be accessible to a wide public, the team engaged in exercises to lay out images of all of the potential objects and combine them by visual properties or particularly interesting themes and stories. Out of the magic of group discussions, the team broke up, recombined, and reinvented the original 16 themes. These were winnowed to four ideas, and finally to a single Big Idea that would become the conceptual framework for the installation. The Big Idea coalesced around the interplay of art and technology:

Objects made in the ancient Middle East demonstrate the emergence of arts as technologies that become fundamental to the expression of cultural identities and the development of the earliest cities, civilizations, and empires in this region.

This Big Idea had advantages. For an art museum, the idea allowed exploration of the ways artistic expression demanded new technologies and new technologies advanced artistic output. From the archaeological side, the idea supported exploration not only of the development of technologies but of the ways those developments affected each other and the ways that new technologies could be used in unanticipated ways. The definition of technology as a process or tool that sparks social and economic change supported the idea that art itself could be seen as a technology. Interestingly, of the original 16 themes and groupings generated by the curator, nine folded neatly into this Big Idea and are explored through the lens of technology.

While the Big Idea would be distilled, the number of objects remained uncomfortably high for the interpretive planner, yet this was normal for practice in archaeological display contexts. The team would install 177 objects in a 2,855 square-foot space intersected by five points of entry/exit. The sheer number of objects defied the “less is more” strategy informing the DIA’s previous art installations. This productive tension required creative thinking about the volume of groupings of objects—particularly small tablets and seals—while still bringing attention to the craftsmanship and detail of individual objects. While object-dense, the overall gallery retains an airy, open feel (Figure 10.1).

### **Disruptive and innovative presentation**

While the Big Idea offers a focus for the entire space, it is not simple or simplistic—it proposes to explore not just the intersections of art and technology in the ancient Middle East, but also to present ways that art was deployed in new ways in early empires. Thus, we divided the gallery in two halves.

The first outlines four technologies. It allows a presentation of objects in groups that reflect technological traditions (stone carving, ceramics, metal working,

and writing) in a way that encourages visitors to look at the objects, yet did not require papering over gaps in the collection. It is an idea that disrupts visitors' contemporary understanding of technology as electronically or digitally based and prompts appreciation for the modern world's indebtedness to the Middle East for the technological advances made in ancient times that are still used today. This Big Idea also resonates with present-day concerns about the role (and unanticipated effects) of technology in society.

The second half of the gallery presents the use of art as a "technology of power" in empire. The objects in this half of the gallery demonstrate the use of art to assert the political ideologies of the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, and Roman Empires. Included here are significant objects: the relief of *Assyrian King Tukul-apil-esharra III Receiving Homage* from the palace at Nimrud (Figure 10.4) and *mushhushshu-dragon, Symbol of the God Marduk* from the Ishtar Gate at Babylon (Figure 10.3). Because of the richness of the DIA collection, we were able to include a Roman floor mosaic from the site of Antioch to speak to the centuries of Greek and Roman rule in the Middle East. This inclusion falls naturally in line with the idea of art as a technology of empire, but represents an innovation in display among major American art museums; Roman objects are more typically displayed in Classical galleries of Greek and Roman art.

Other decisions about presenting these objects, cultures, and peoples were carefully considered with attention to progressive practices in representation. For example, the canonical art historical and archaeological name of the king depicted in the DIA's Assyrian relief was Tiglath-pileser III, a mis-pronunciation transmitted through the biblical tradition. The name was changed to reflect the original Assyrian name of the Assyrian king—Tukul-apil-esharra.

As planning progressed, the generative tensions between curator–archaeologist, art museum interpreter, and museological practices produced new and unusual interpretive approaches in the DIA's art museum context. A display of cylinder and stamp seals included raw soft and hard stones such as chlorite, lapis lazuli, agate, and rock crystal alongside the polished and expertly carved seals (Figure 10.7). This approach echoes natural history museum displays but served to underline the technological achievements in stone carving necessary to achieve the artistic transformations. Nearly all museums' displays of stone cylinder seals include an impression made in a polymer clay, which emphasizes function. The DIA added 360-degree photography<sup>2</sup> of each cylinder seal to emphasize the stone cutter's process and encourage visitors to appreciate the astonishing detail of the carvings (Figure 10.8).

Finally, by interpreting ancient objects for the technological innovations required to create them, and that they spurred, naturally invited technology-based interpretation in the gallery (Figure 10.9). A digital map-in-motion shows architectural fragments in their original building contexts, but also within in a mapped timeline that conveys the use of the objects as tools to build and expand empires. A computer response station invites visitors to answer a prompt; their ideas are translated into cuneiform and sent to visitor emails to connect to the invention of writing as an information technology.



Figure 10.7 Part of a display of seals with carved seals and raw materials (alabaster, lapis lazuli, and carnelian), and images of the seal surfaces

Courtesy of the Detroit Institute of Arts



Figure 10.8 High resolution 360-degree photograph of the surface of a cylinder seal depicting an offering to the Mesopotamian sun-god Shamash, ca. 1800 BCE (DIA 45.498)

Photograph taken by Prof. Wayne Pitard for the DIA (see Note 1). Courtesy of the Detroit Institute of Arts

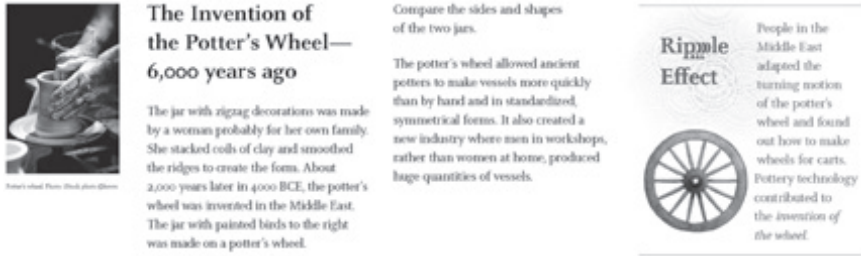


Figure 10.9 Gallery label describing a “ripple effect”—a way that developing technologies could have unexpected consequences

Courtesy of the Detroit Institute of Arts

## Evaluation

Various types of visitor evaluation—both formal and informal—were conducted for AME at different stages. During the concept phase, focus groups were conducted to test the Big Idea and early themes. The use of the focus groups for AME is different from our approaches nearly 10 years ago for the 2007 reinstallation. At that time, visitor panels of 10–12 people each consulted on a wide range of collections. A single visitor panel, for instance, responded to ideas for American, African-American, Modern, and Contemporary Art, which take up nearly one-third of the DIA's gallery spaces. Those panels included three individuals from minority communities. By contrast, AME's four focus groups brought in 25 people to test for a single collection area. Importantly, the focus groups created a significant space for people from Middle Eastern communities living in the United States to voice their reactions.

The DIA hired Garibay Group, a Chicago firm that specializes in culturally-responsive visitor research, to conduct front-end evaluation in the form of four focus groups: two groups included people reflecting our general visitorship and two included people who self-identified as Middle Eastern or of Middle Eastern heritage. They were brought in during the early concept phase of interpretive planning when we had loosely organized Big Ideas with highlight objects. We posed questions to them to gauge familiarity with the ancient Middle East, identify preconceptions, and understand expectations. We also tested our early concepts and object organizations, asking what themes they found most and least intriguing or confusing. The purpose of these focus groups was for us to understand where people are in their levels of familiarity with and interest in the art and interpretation so we could best assess visitor needs for access and engagement and make decisions to improve the installation.

For example, we had planned to present the scholarly debate over the authenticity of the Gudea statue (noted above; Muscarella 2005). In an effort to connect with contemporary events, we also sought to convey the message that purchasing objects on the art market can stimulate looting of archaeological sites. Focus group

results showed that participants were confused by this conflation of messages. It prompted visitors to question the authenticity of other objects in installation, as well as the reliability of the museum as a trustworthy source of information. As a result, we focused the interpretation only on the scholarly debate about Gudea and referenced ISIS with a series of Assyrian objects, directly connected to the recent decimation of cultural heritage sites in Iraq and Syria (Figure 10.4).

Another interesting finding from the focus groups was a distinct difference in the way general visitors received the idea of technology compared to participants in the Middle Eastern focus groups. The Middle Eastern participants raised no questions or concerns about the use of the term “technology.” However, half of the general visitor participants were confounded by the idea that stone carving or ceramics could be considered technologies. Their strong conversation told us the idea had good potential for engaging visitors in new thinking.

Formative evaluation of interpretive elements, such as labels, videos, and interactives, gave information about whether objectives were being met and informed redrafting and refinement. For AME, we tested about 22 interpretive elements with 10–12 visitors responding to each, for a total of about 220 visitor responses.

All of the above evaluation types tested ideas or mock-ups and prototypes before installation. The logic for rigorous testing during the process is that testing in one stage informs the next and through such comprehensive visitor evaluation, we can generally predict positive outcomes in the final installation. While feedback from colleagues and visitor comments left through the interactive cuneiform response station have been quite positive, these results can only be considered anecdotal. Summative evaluations, which are conducted after installation is complete and the galleries are in use, offer the best assessment of whether team intentions were realized, what fell short for visitors, and what can be corrected.

At the time of this writing, only tracking and timing studies have been completed for the AME gallery. The studies, conducted in 2016 when in-museum attendance was 646,980, show that the average visitor dwell time in the gallery is 7 minutes 34 seconds. The highest average for one of the most popular galleries in the museum (the European Art of Dining) was 4 minutes 51 seconds. While part of the increase is likely attributed to the larger size of the AME space and its density of objects, the overall 56% increase in dwell time is remarkable. Comments from visitors documented during tracking and timing indicate experiences of high interest, reflection, surprise, personal connections, and feelings of awe (Detroit Institute of Arts 2016).<sup>3</sup>

## Summary

We each learned from the challenges we encountered during exhibit development.

From the curatorial perspective, the biggest challenge was keeping a disciplined focus on the Big Idea and associated narratives. Objects speak in many voices, and we could not tell many of their stories. Studies of what visitors were understanding from our early label drafts made it clear that we would confuse

them and thus reduce engagement if we tried to layer multiple stories in the gallery. The focus on visitor understanding also led to a decision to provide the approximate date of the objects' creation without reference to the names of periods that archaeologists and historians commonly use. This was initially almost unthinkable for the curator, but it became clear that those who thought in those terms would be able to supply them given the dates on the object labels. Finally, museum style required that each object be labeled with the name of its maker, and by "unknown artist" if the maker was unknown. While this seemed to the curator to propose a notion of art and of an individual creative artist that was foreign in many ways to the ancient world, this also turned out to be an argument that was not winnable when facing institution-wide labeling standards intended to provide consistency for visitors across the museum's collections.

The process also led the curator to reconsider what it meant to curate a successful gallery or exhibit. While he had not ever been asked to articulate his view on this question, he came to understand that in his own personal view, a successful gallery is one that presents a good story and tells it well. Other curators and exhibit developers will undoubtedly have other standards. In his view, a good story is one that is resonant—it connects to interesting and important issues that matter in perhaps varied ways to a wide variety of people. A good story is told well in exhibit form if it has striking objects, if the gallery is a comfortable and clearly organized space, and if the writing is appropriate for exhibition—short and to the point rather than long and dense. While installing the ancient Middle East gallery did not change the curator's view of what made a successful gallery, it opened his mind to new possibilities for identifying stories that would seem interesting not only to curators, but also to audiences with diverse interests. The collaborative process described here greatly enhanced the ways that gallery would resonate with a wider variety of people than it would have if the curator's scholarly perspective had been the exclusive voice.

In terms of interpretive planning, we could have engaged members of our communities more robustly, ideally by making presentations in regional organizations serving Arab, Chaldean, Muslim, Jewish, and other communities with historical and cultural connections to the Middle East. These types of in-community meetings allow project teams to gather feedback and connect with community members who might critique labels and offer their own perspectives for inclusion in the gallery. Such meetings also build connection and trust between museums and communities in ways that can heighten meaningful interpretive approaches for all visitors. These missed opportunities remain possibilities for future remediations in the gallery, as well as for other permanent collection reinstallation projects now underway.

Nevertheless, we have both been pleased with the installation and early research is showing that visitors are engaging with the objects and ideas presented. This collaboration resulted in an innovative gallery that fits the collection and its strengths in more interesting ways than it would have without the team-based approach. The curator appreciated the interpretive planner's experience in understanding audiences and creative structuring of ideas that made for

more engaging visitor experiences. The interpretive planner valued the curator's wealth of understanding and research about the collection, and particularly his ability to think outside scholarly disciplines to imagine new interpretations. This project highlighted what becomes possible when the strengths of team members are synchronized to goals of creating rich, resonant, meaningful experiences for visitors with the museum's collection.

## Notes

- 1 Thanks to Bill Peck, former Curator of Ancient Art at the DIA, for this summary.
- 2 The DIA commissioned Wayne Pitard, recently retired director of the Spurlock Museum, to examine and photograph cylinder seals in the collection. The images are integrated in the gallery and published by Lina Meerchyad (2015).
- 3 Examples of comments documented in tracking and timing data collection (Detroit Institute of Arts 2016):
  - This is amazing.
  - Can you imagine finding that!?
  - Wow, this is old ... amazing!
  - Oh, oh wow!
  - 5,000 years old!
  - Makes me think about what ISIL has done.
  - That was 30 minutes away from where I lived! [referring to walls of Nineveh]
  - This is our history. [man talking to son and daughter gesturing towards Assyrian section]

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# 11 An archaeological exhibition without archaeology?

## Joan Miró looks at Mesopotamian masterpieces

*Pedro Azara and Marc Marín*

### Introduction

The Institute for the Study of the Ancient World in New York (ISAW) organized an exhibition called, “From Ancient to Modern: Archaeology and Aesthetics” (Chi and Azara 2015), from February to June 2015, focused, among other crucial subjects, on the reception of Mesopotamian archaeological material by modern and contemporary artists, writers, and poets, mainly American and European, since the 1920s until the present. Georges Bataille, Henry Moore, Alberto Giacometti, and Willem de Kooning were presented as case studies. The question was how some Sumerian masterpieces—including the headdress of queen Pu-abi of Ur, the worshipper statues and figurines found in the Diyala Valley in Iraq, and a selection of well-known archaeological material from Kish—were interpreted and judged by 20th-century Western audiences through eminently modern aesthetic criteria. Recent research of scholars such as Zainab Bahrani and Jean Evans strongly nourished the narrative of the exhibition. Nonetheless, if we had known back then the subject for this chapter, possibly the selection of pieces would have been different.

This exhibition was a less timid version of “Before the Flood: Mesopotamia 3500–2100 bc” that we curated and designed for the Caixaforum, in Barcelona and Madrid, in 2012 before the final version of “Sumer and the Modern Paradigm” at the Joan Miró Foundation in Barcelona in 2017–18. Why are we using the word “timid” and why was the exhibition a “final version”? In the three mentioned exhibitions we have curated, we mixed original ancient Middle Eastern artifacts, documentation, and modern or contemporary works of art, all displayed in a similar way. Differences were caused by the requirements of the lenders, without establishing any difference nor fixing any categorization between works of art, whether ancient or modern, and documents (which are usually interesting to look at for what they say but not for how they look, as their image is not the reason for them to “be”). Two important contemporary works of art—a video installation “Shadow Sites II” made in 2011 by the Iraqi artist Jananne al-Ani, and black and white images from Mesopotamia in the 1980s made by the German photographer Ursula Schulz-Dornburg—were included in the “Before the Flood” show. “From Ancient to

Modern” included—among a quite large selection of ancient Middle Eastern artifacts such as Queen Pu-abi’s golden headdress—a small selection of artworks, music, and film fragments by Henry Moore, Alberto Giacometti, Willem de Kooning, Jananne al-Ani, Michael Rakowitz, George Fitzmaurice, and Joan Borrell. These were shown to challenge the idealized image of the past and to suggest that past is a modern construction.

The idea was fully developed in the exhibition “Sumer and the Modern Paradigm,” which was not purely about the ancient Middle East. Rather, this show explains how we look at and judge ancient Middle Eastern items thanks to the help of modern artists who, impressed and fascinated by archaeological artifacts, have looked at and interpreted those ancient items through modern works of art. As we showed together Joan Miró sculptures and Syro-Mesopotamian terracotta female figurines that inspired Miró, we discovered that some visitors thought that Miró was the sculptor of the ancient figurines, and at the same time they began to appreciate Miró’s sculptures—which were previously downgraded—thanks to their formal relation with ancient items. Ancient and modern items were infused with different values but they mutually helped the visitor to appreciate items belonging to such different times. Would it be convenient to dilute strongly raised barriers between different cultures and times?

## Discovery

In August 2015, two months after the closing of the exhibition at ISAW, a visit to the foundation of the Spanish painter and sculptor Joan Miró in Palma de Mallorca, in Spain, exposed us to a most intriguing revelation. One the rooms of an old traditional house where he held his studio, known as Son Boter, revealed nearly a dozen photograph cuttings showing Mesopotamian, mostly Sumerian, masterpieces. These photographs or clips had been hung by Miró himself in the late 1950s and had not been removed since.

This juxtaposition of ancient and modern material, suggesting and studying the interesting relations emerging between them, was in fact, precisely what we had intended to achieve at the ISAW exhibition. We were both surprised and disappointed since we realized that Miró would have been an excellent case study for the “Archaeology and Aesthetics” show. We had no knowledge of previous research indicating Miró’s interest in Mesopotamian art. Further research brought us to a paper presented by Brigitte Pedde (2012) in a colloquium in London, on the influence of Mesopotamian art in modern art and architecture. In her paper, Pedde had noticed the presence of these images in Miró’s studio, among other examples. However, since her paper did not mention the origin of these images, we have since started our own research on the matter, as a sort of an addendum to the ISAW exhibition.

The curators and librarians of the Miró Foundations and Succession in Palma de Mallorca and Barcelona, in Spain, as well as Miró’s heirs, have generously

helped us. We have not yet found one single reference mentioning Miró's interest in Mesopotamian art in scholarly literature. We find numerous mentions of Miró's viewing of Greek art, African art, Pre-Columbian cultures (mainly Katchina dolls), "Eastern" art (meaning China and Japan), or sculptures from Easter Island ... but nothing on Mesopotamia. To the knowledge of curators, relatives, and ourselves, no article in a book, catalog, or magazine, with the exception of Pedde's paper, mentioned, for instance, that the mask of Warka and some of the most famous large Khafaje statues had attracted Miró's attention.

### **"Accommodating the space"**

The walls at the studio in Son Boter on which Miró hung these photographs are washed in white plaster, which the painter used for graffiti (Figures 11.1–2), showing human figures, mostly traces of female figures and heads (Punyet Miro and del Moral 2015). Miró declared that he was unable to make art in a space with no qualities. He needed to fill the walls with items and images he loved. He needed to be surrounded by them (Catoir 1995). These items on the walls were mostly small, cheap, anonymous items such as toys, shells, stones with certain shapes, small branches, traditional art figurines, industrial items with shapes that could be read as anthropomorphic or animal forms (Picon 2002). They had a strong emotional and personal value to him.

These elements were used as motifs in Miró's work (Panicelli and Rico Lacasa 1994). He used them as inspiration for the paintings and sculptures he designed in his studio. The photographs, particularly, were some of the first items he placed at his studio to "accommodate" the space after he bought the house in the late 1950s. He never removed them. We now know that the Sumerian figures lasted



*Figure 11.1* Joan Miró's studio at Son Boter (Palma de Mallorca, Spain): external view  
Courtesy of the authors



Figure 11.2 Joan Miró's studio at Son Boter (Palma de Mallorca, Spain): view of the entrance and the first floor

Courtesy of the authors

for 30 years on the walls of his studio, and in his will, he clearly specified that everything should be kept as it was at the time of his decease.

Almost all cut printed photographs and postcards Miró collected show images of archaeological items, except for a photograph of a traditional chair: an ancient Balkan bell-shaped idol, a sculpture that seems to be a head from Cyprus showing both Greek and Near Eastern features, an Iranian “Amlash” figure (a female idol or “mother goddess” from the 1st millennium BCE), a bronze scepter from Palestine located today at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, an African fetish (which we still have not been able to locate), two Catalan Romanesque frescoes, and finally Mesopotamian masterpieces, including statues, figurines, masks, and reliefs (Figures 11.3–11.5).

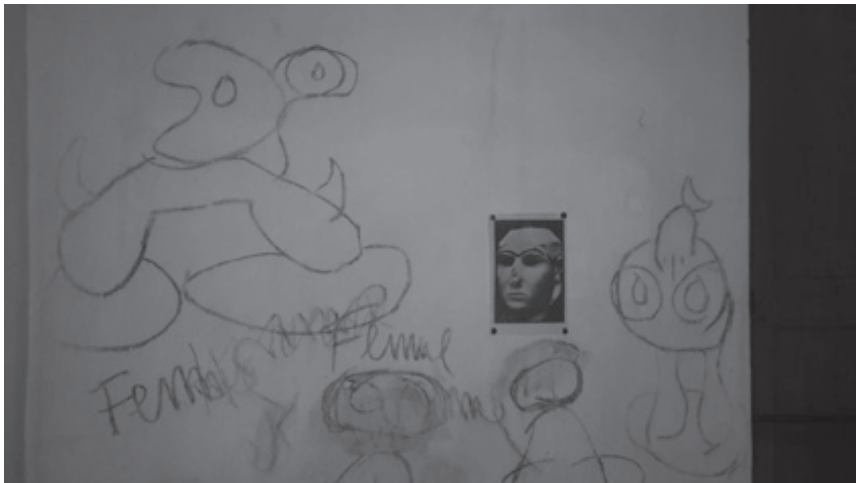
Since the early 1960s, Miró dedicated himself to fully covering the walls of his studio with charcoal graffiti. Words and expressions suggesting titles of works of art can be read, written in French and Catalan; some of these can easily be related to well-known works of Miró: *Femme*, *Femme et oiseau*, *Femme et coquillage*, *Personnage*, *Personnage dans la nuit*, *Personnage et oiseau*, *Tête d'homme et Femme*, *Objets dans le calme*, *Monument à un couple d'amoureux* .... Others, on the contrary, are less common, like *Beau comme une cathédrale gothique*.

Clipping photograph cuttings to his easel was not an uncommon practice for Miró. He was used to sticking them on canvases he would afterwards paint. They were used as motifs. Sometimes, the final painting or sculpture can be directly related to the clip that he used as inspiration. We can observe this relation, especially in his works before the Spanish Civil War, in the late 1930s.



*Figure 11.3* Joan Miró's graffiti on the walls of the Son Boter studio and printed photographs of Sumerian sculpture (worshipper figure) stuck with thumbtacks on the walls of the studio

Courtesy of the authors



*Figure 11.4* Joan Miró's graffiti on the walls of the Son Boter studio and printed photographs of Sumerian sculpture ("Lady of Warka") stuck with thumbtacks on the walls of the studio

Courtesy of the authors



Figure 11.5 Joan Miró's graffiti on the walls of the Son Boter studio and printed photographs of Sumerian sculpture (the "Lion Hunt Stele") stuck with thumbtacks on the walls of the studio

Courtesy of the authors

### Origin of the photographs

We decided to trace back the photographs to reveal their origin, in an attempt to understand how Miró got these printed photographs of Sumerian masterpieces. Luckily, the archives at the Miró Foundation in Barcelona held a large paper photograph cutting in sepia from a magazine, showing the image of a Neo-Sumerian terracotta figurine from Tello (Figure 11.6). Thanks to the help of the archivist at the Picasso Museum in Barcelona, Spain, we were able to identify the magazine from which the page had been cut. It appeared to be the French cultural magazine *Arts & Loisirs* from February 1966. To our luck, all but two of the photographs belonged to this same magazine.

*Arts & Loisirs* was published between 1966 and 1967. It was a French cultural magazine edited by the journalist André Parinaud. In its short life, the magazine was able to publish articles by well-known writers and philosophers such as Georges Perec, Michel Foucault, and Claude Bonnefoy. Even the French Assyriologist Jean Bottéro contributed a text. Bottéro's text was one of the two illustrated articles that caught Miró's attention.

Both articles dealt with the same topic: a large and stunning exhibition that had opened at the Mollien Gallery at the Louvre Museum in Paris, lasting from January to March 1966. The exhibition was called "Trésors du Musée de Bagdad: des Origines à l'Islam." It was an international traveling exhibition of masterpieces from the Iraq Museum, curated by André Parrot, shown at least in Paris and Bordeaux, in France, but previously in Hamburg in 1964 and Turin and Lisbon in 1965. This exhibition included, among others, the following works of art: a terracotta male figurine from Eridu, first half of 4th millennium BCE (IMB 54931); a



Figure 11.6 *Arts & Loisirs* magazine: illustrated article on a travelling exhibition of masterpieces from the Iraq Museum held in Paris in 1966 that Joan Miró cut and hung

Courtesy of the authors

terracotta female figurine, unknown provenance, second half 5th millennium BCE (IMB 42610); the famous Warka mask, late 4th millennium–early 3rd millennium BCE (IMB 45434); the hunting stele, Uruk, end of 4th millennium–early 3rd millennium BCE (IMB 23477); a copper support with worshipper statue, Khafaje, first half of the 3rd millennium BCE (IMB 8969); a worshipper statuette, Eshnunna, first half of 3rd millennium BCE (IMB 19754); a warrior figurine, Tello-Lagash, Neo-Sumerian (IMB 16303); a female figurine, Old Babylonian dynasty (IMB 21399). We were able to see most of these items again on display at the Iraq Museum after the Second Gulf War and the devastation of the museum in 2003. The reason for this international exhibition—which for obvious reasons would be difficult nowadays—was due to the closure of the old museum in Baghdad, while the new museum was still under construction, a project undertaken thanks to Gertrude Bell.

### Formal interpretation

We now know that Miró was attracted to these Mesopotamian (mostly Sumerian) objects, but we can only speculate about the nature of his interest. We may think that they fit his taste or conception of what art should be, of how it should



represent the world. Large hypotonic eyes and schematic figures had always fascinated him.

Brigitte Pedde already pointed out possible formal relations between the position of the arms and the gesture of the hands of a large Sumerian worshipper statue and some of Miró's graffiti. It is in fact a common gesture in Miró's anthropomorphic representations.

Additionally, we would add the hypothesis of a formal similarity between the bow that a warrior is handling in a fragment of a Sumerian relief and the moon in the nearby graffiti. The moon is a motif that constantly appears in Miró's work since his early paintings. Related to female figures, surrealist Spanish artists often compared the shape of the moon to the horns of a bull—a transformation that Miró must have known well. However, this seems to be the first time where the moon is associated with a bow. Miró would have used a shape identified in a Sumerian vase to give a meaning to his drawing: the bow, as a symbol of war or hunt, transubstantiated or transfigured to a crescent moon, changing its meaning, since the moon has been interpreted as a symbol of love.

Some of these sketches on the walls were used as drafts for future works. Historians have shown the relation between a graffito showing a large head and a later bronze sculpture shown at Son Boter. Next to the drawing, we find precisely the Diyala figurine from the Iraq Museum, next to the words *sense cabellera ni forats*, which in Catalan means "without hair or holes." It is accepted that this same graffito served also as inspiration for another work by Miró, the marble sculpture *Femme échevelée*, meaning "Woman with a Tousled Look" (1968), shown at the gardens of the Maeght Foundation in Saint-Paul de Vence, in France. We are speculating on the connection between these two large sculptures and the Sumerian figurine.

## More on Mesopotamia

However, some previously unknown facts about Miró's relation to Mesopotamia are not speculations. The Miró Succession Archives at Palma de Mallorca hold a postcard that Henri Matisse sent to Miró on August 7, 1934, representing a small copper bull from Tello (Figure 11.7). Again, we see the bull iconography, so present in a large number of paintings, drawings, and sculptures of so many Spanish avant-garde artists.

We know that Miró bought the first French edition of Samuel Noah Kramer's *History Begins in Sumer*, published in 1957 (and kept in the Miró Archives at the Miró Foundation in Barcelona). André Malraux sent him a dedicated volume of his books on the "Imaginary Museum," including most of the Sumerian masterpieces Miró would later hang on his walls. He also had a copy of André Parrot's well-known book on Assur, in a Spanish edition of 1961.

In addition, he kept a fragment of the guide of an exhibition, held at the Maeght Foundation from July to September 1973, dedicated to André Malraux. The exhibition included some outstanding archaeological items, among them, a well-known seated worshipper from Mari, belonging to the National Museum





Figure 11.7 Postcard sent by Matisse to Miró in 1934 with a photograph of a bull head from Tello exhibited at the Louvre Museum in Paris

Courtesy of the authors

of Damascus. The image of this figurine was printed on the cover of the guide of the exhibition, which Miró cut and hung on one of the walls at his studio. Additionally, in one of his notebooks he wrote down a series of volumes of the French magazine *Cahiers d'Art* that were devoted to Mesopotamian art, in a list of publications he wanted to acquire.

It seems that Miró's knowledge of Mesopotamian culture was deeper than expected. To our surprise, in comparison to the very few publications on Egyptian, Cycladic, Greek, or Far Eastern art in his personal library, publications of Mesopotamian art outnumber the rest.

## Ballet

We have been able to trace another use that Miró made of the Sumerian figurines shown in the *Arts & Loisirs* magazine. Kept in a large envelope that contained graphic material, he used it as a reference for a ballet. Miró was not the first modern artist to be involved in the design of theatrical scenography. Many others painters, such as Pablo Picasso, from the early 20th century, were in charge of set and wardrobe of theater plays and ballets.

Miró conceived a ballet called *L'Oeil Oiseau* (Dupin 1981; Bravo et al. 1995) in the early 1930s, a work he would continuously revise during the rest of his life. He was initially in charge of the plot and the costume design. In a version of the 1960s, which ultimately did not take place for economic reasons, the Sumerian statuette was supposed to be shown, together with the other images on the envelope held at his Foundation in Barcelona, in a rapid manner on a screen, "in order to evoke the painter, his studio, his work and universe" (Dupin 1993:346).

### **Anonymous, timeless art**

For Miró, great art was collective and anonymous. He believed that what he called “primitive” art—in which he included Sumerian art—was anonymous. Popular and collective art were anonymous as well. In order to find true art: “il faut remonter jusqu’aux sources de l’expression pour retrouver le collectif” (Rowell 1995:241; “it is necessary to go back to the sources of expression to rediscover the collective”). We could find this attribute in modern ballet as well: “le ballet est le type même de l’art collectif” (Rowell 1995:241; “ballet is the epitome of collective art”). Ballet, “primitive,” popular, and anonymous art were all intimately associated for Miró.

All images on the envelope for the ballet show traditional, folkloric, anonymous objects and spaces. They were not personal creations, but instead, they followed traditional patterns, materials, and techniques that belonged to no one. Miró was fond of objects and buildings whose author had not been remembered, because, for him, names of artists were not important.

We can speculate that even if Miró knew that those terracotta figurines belonged to Sumerian culture, he chose to look at them as traditional figures, in a similar way as he looked at the traditional Mediterranean or Balearic painted terracotta figurines called “siurells.” Probably it is precisely for this reason that no one mentioned before Brigitte Pedde that the clips on his studio walls were Mesopotamian. The permanence of shapes and techniques fascinated Miró. Sumerian figurines were thousands of years old, and yet they looked like modern traditional works he loved, bought, and collected in his studio. In both ancient and modern sculptures, the notion of author, of the personal creator, was abolished.

Sumerian items were valuable for Miró not because they were old but because there were timeless, showing that great art was not ahead of time, but out of time, relevant in any period.

How do our experience and reflections contribute to the present publication focused on the reception and exhibition of ancient Middle Eastern material? We were initially planning to focus on the conditions of exhibiting archaeological material, related to the show “From Ancient to Modern,” mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. However, what should have been initially an addendum case study of the exhibition in New York turned out to capture the attention of the Miró Foundation in Barcelona. They have understood that this revelation is most interesting for them, and agreed to start organizing a small exhibition on the matter, which opened at the end of 2017.

So now our question was, “What should be shown in such an exhibition?” Would it be ideal to undertake a similar selection of objects as in the case of the exhibition at ISAW in New York, showing both modern works of art by Miró together with the original archaeological material which he used for inspiration? This was completely out of the question, since most of these items belong to museums that are unable, if not unwilling, to lend their collections out at present—such as the Iraq Museum or the National Museum of Damascus.

However, even if we were able to bring them to the Miró Foundation in Barcelona, would it be necessary, or even appropriate? Both exhibitions, at the ISAW and at the Miró Foundation, are not in fact exhibitions on ancient items or cultures, but instead, they focus on the way these items and cultures were perceived and interpreted by a certain audience in a given period. They are not exhibitions on ancient culture, but on the way the history of this ancient culture has been built.

Does this focus turn the exhibition into an archaeological exhibition? Alternatively, are we exclusively dealing with modern art, through the eyes of Miró? In fact, a contemporary art exhibition may include only archival material, since it is accepted that the process of creation of a work of art produces objects and documentation sometimes equally as important as the final culminating work. If we included archaeological archival material, would we be talking about an archaeological exhibition?

The question we are facing now can be answered only if we are able to know what Miró in fact saw—how he saw the Sumerian artifacts. Did he see them live, in Paris or in Saint-Paul de Vence, or did he only see them as photographs in publications? What precisely captured his attention: the object, or the image of it? We do not know whether he saw live Sumerian artifacts from the Iraq Museum in 1966, nor whether he had seen Sumerian or Mesopotamian artifacts from the Louvre Museum in previous journeys to Paris.

The exhibition does not deal with Sumerian art, but with Miró looking at Sumerian art. As we are dealing with images, we should work with images, showing what he saw, even if we are aware that what he saw is not what we shall see. The exhibition deals in fact with our vision of Miró's vision of Mesopotamian masterpieces.

We are exhibiting objects that were not created to be shown, and that were not always and necessarily looked at as manmade items. By the sole fact of deciding to exhibit them, we are taking a modern point of view on them. Art museums have transformed all manmade artifacts into works of art, totally changing their meaning. This is not a problem, but a fact.

Still, we can only judge them as works of art. In addition, the sole fact that we “judge” them shows a modern relation to these items.

## Conclusion

Prior to the exhibitions discussed in this chapter (“Before the Food: Mesopotamia 3500–2100 BC” in 2012, “From Ancient to Modern: Archaeology and Aesthetics” in 2015, and “Sumer and the Modern Paradigm” in 2017), a series of successful temporary exhibitions dedicated to art concepts (“Artempo” in 2007, “Infinitum” in 2009, “Tra” in 2011, “Proportio” in 2015, and “Intuition” in 2017), all curated by Axel Vervoordt at the Palazzo Fortuny in Venice, Italy, have mixed ancient (including ancient Middle Eastern), modern, and contemporary works of art in order to show not formal but “spiritual” similarities or ends. We can recall the Babylon exhibition, curated by Béatrice

André-Salvini, at three venues (Louvre Museum, Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin, and the British Museum) in 2008–09, that included modern works, such as a Frank Lloyd Wright's late project for Baghdad. Wright's work shows the persistence of the Babylon myth in Western and Eastern imagination.

But in the Babylon exhibit, modern and contemporary material was not shown with ancient material. Permanent exhibitions in some museums have also temporarily included modern or contemporary works of art with ancient Middle Eastern artifacts: the Oriental Institute presented some cardboard sculptures from the series "The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist," by Michael Rakowitz, among Mesopotamian worshipper statues—as we did later at the "From Ancient to Modern" exhibition; and the British Museum placed Henry Moore early sculptures in the permanent collection of Sumerian worshipper statues. But these combinations were planned for a short period of time. Modern and contemporary art has definitively entered museums with ancient art collections—among them ancient Middle Eastern art—but it seems that this joint venture has been, until now, just an adventurous attempt. The art historian Aby Warburg placed works of art from far different cultures and times on the same level, but this cohabitation took place only on paper ("[Warburg] was looking for the meaning and the functions of art for different societies, their role for different social classes and the energy of cultural memory they preserve"; Bruhn 2006). He collected photos and glued them on boards to show how some universal human emotions had been similarly expressed through times and within cultures. He sees art as a way to explore human anxieties and desires.

We propose that this juxtaposition is of great importance. Modern and contemporary art helps us to understand ancient art. Why did the Sumerian worshipper statues have such large eyes? The short film of Samuel Beckett made in 1966 and included in the exhibition "Sumer and the Modern Paradigm" might give a plausible explanation: fear of discovering who we are—and a secret attraction to get in touch with our other hidden face and feelings.

If art, ancient as well as modern, has the power to open windows to the unknown, the key to what ancient art retains may be art from our times. We suggest here that we can better understand ancient art with the help of modern and contemporary art. But this can only be accomplished if barriers between times and cultures are gone.

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## Part IV

# Perspectives from university museums



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## 12 Between visuality and context

### Presenting archaeological narratives at the Oriental Institute<sup>1</sup>

*John D.M. Green*

#### Introduction

The Oriental Institute is a research organization and museum devoted to the study of the ancient Middle East. Founded in 1919 by James Henry Breasted, the Institute, a part of the University of Chicago, is an internationally recognized pioneer in the archaeology, philology, and history of early Middle Eastern civilizations. Within the Oriental Institute, the Oriental Institute Museum plays an important role in presenting the ancient Middle East to a wide range of scholarly and public audiences through its important collections. Here I argue that archaeological and historical narratives dominate the Oriental Institute Museum in its current form to the extent that appreciation and interpretation of the collections as “art” has been downplayed significantly. The Oriental Institute Museum is neither presented, nor perceived, as a traditional art museum by the general public or its more specialized scholarly audiences. The Oriental Institute is generally considered to be a history and archaeology museum, or a specialized museum. Anecdotal feedback suggests that many visitors without prior knowledge of the museum believe that it focuses on East Asian art, presumably because of its title.

On-site visitors to the Oriental Institute Museum number around 50,000 annually and include a significant cohort with a connection to the University of Chicago, estimated at around 20–25%. This group includes faculty, students, staff, and alumni of the University, as well as professional or academic visitors to campus and prospective students and their family members. Another significant cohort, making up just under two-thirds of the visitors, consists of visitors from Hyde Park and the Chicago metropolitan area, as well as domestic and international tourists and visitors to Chicago. A small but significant group of visitors engage with the museum through public education and outreach activities—including children from Chicago’s public and private schools, as well as adults, family and youth, and educators. Public education and outreach account for 10–15% of visitors. For a recent overview of the Oriental Institute, its Museum and Public Education and Outreach Department, the Annual Reports of the Oriental Institute (also available online) serve as a useful guide to the scope of the Institute’s activities (e.g., Stein 2015). For these visitors, the museum serves as an important introduction to the University of Chicago as one of the most publicly



accessible locations on campus. A major strength of the Oriental Institute is the supporting role that faculty, research associates, staff, and university students play in museum exhibits, research, and teaching using the collections, and the active role that museum staff and volunteers play in supporting the work of the expeditions and in facilitating research.

This essay presents an interpretation of display methods in museums, considering how there might be differences between the way in which art and archaeology museums motivate and inspire visitors to learn more about their collections. Does the Oriental Institute Museum have any elements that it shares with an “art museum” setting? I will assess whether more aesthetically driven display strategies, used more commonly in art museums might provide engaging ways of presenting the past, while taking care to ensure that context, whether archaeological, social, technological, or historical, can also be presented in such displays or in adjacent spaces.

The relationship between archaeology and art is a long-standing one. It is thought that through the more positivistic focus of archaeology from the late 19th century onwards, art as discipline and practice has tended to be viewed somewhat separately, although there is greater recognition today of the important interplay between the two disciplines (Russell and Cochrane 2014). It is argued that through the Oriental Institute Museum’s focus on history, ancient languages, and archaeology, there have been attempts to distance the way in which its collections are presented in contrast to the typical art museum, which may acquire and display antiquities that lack archaeological provenience. A focus on context, archaeological provenience, and history of excavation is what sets the Oriental Institute Museum apart from many art museums that usually lack this important information. As expressed in Gil Stein’s foreword to the recently published catalog of the highlights of the museum (Evans et al. 2017), the “vast majority of our more than 300,000 registered objects were scientifically excavated means that we know their exact provenience—the archaeological site where they originated, the stratigraphic layer from which they were recovered, and most importantly, their context, specifically the other objects with which they were associated. As a result, our museum collections provide an extremely valuable resource on the origins and development of ancient Near Eastern civilizations” (Stein 2017:9).

The terms “provenance” and “provenience” are distinguished in this essay purposefully and are not intended to be used interchangeably. “Provenance” in this essay refers to information concerning an object’s ownership history. “Provenience” is used to mean a specific archaeological find-spot or association with a specific archaeological site or location within a site. Another more recently coined term for such objects in a museum display context is that of “grounded” and “ungrounded” artifacts—i.e., those that are “grounded” retain some find-spot or related information about where they may have been recovered (Marlowe 2016).

I will briefly characterize the history of the Oriental Institute Museum and its collections. For an overview of the history, background, and ethos of the

Oriental Institute and its Museum, multiple sources can be consulted (e.g., Abt 2011; Breasted 1943; Larsen 1989). Few authors have specifically focused on an overall presentation and history of the museum (but see Emberling 2009; Teeter 2017), though there are studies that explore the history of its early expeditions and acquisitions which in turn helped to shape key elements of the museum's collections (Emberling 2010; Goode 2007; Teeter 2011).

## **History of the museum**

The earliest manifestation of the Oriental Institute Museum at the University of Chicago was the Haskell Oriental Museum, which was completed and opened in 1896 (Anon. 1896; Goodspeed and Harper 1896). Founded and directed by William Rainey Harper, the first president of the newly formed University of Chicago and Head of the Department of Semitic Languages, the Museum was initially represented by casts and a small collection of objects that Egyptologist James Henry Breasted, one of the fledgling museum's curators, had purchased for the university during a visit to Egypt in 1894–95 (Teeter 2011). Part of the mission of the museum at that time was to help broaden and deepen knowledge of the world's sacred scriptures—not only from the biblical world, but also from other regions of the world. It is notable that the museum's earliest collections included artifacts related to Shinto and Buddhist religion from East Asia. In this sense, the Haskell Oriental Museum was more comparative in its presentation of collections than it is today, as it covered Eastern as well as Western Asia.

The late 19th century was a great coming-of-age period in the United States for museums and cultural institutions (see chapter by Lacovara, this volume). Although this development was largely inspired by museums in Europe that had developed out of the European Enlightenment tradition, this was also a time in which university museums were emerging as centers of knowledge production. The production of knowledge at this time also included the study of archaeology, history, and language from the ancient Near East, which was undergoing its own transition from a world of gifted amateurs, collectors, and antiquarian explorers, to highly specialized scholars established in academic institutions. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York had already become established in the 1870s (see chapter by Aruz and Rakic, this volume). Other university museums that emerged around the late 1880s and 1890s with Near Eastern collections included the Johns Hopkins Archaeological Museum, the University of Pennsylvania Museum (see chapter by Pittman, this volume), and the Harvard Semitic Museum. At around the same time, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Field Museum in Chicago had been founded following the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. The World's Fair at this time had occupied the length of the Midway Plaisance, just a short distance from where the Haskell Oriental Museum was to be established.

The Haskell Oriental Museum's collections grew significantly during the first official expedition of the early 20th century, to Bismaya (ancient Adab) in southern Iraq (Wilson 2012). This expedition alone yielded over 1,000 accessioned objects for the Museum through its excavator, James Edgar Banks. This includes

the famous head of a ruler, known as the Bismaya head, dated to the Third Dynasty of Ur (ca. 2097–1989 BCE), a key object in the museum's collection that has continued to generate interest in art historical surveys of early Mesopotamia (Wilson 2003). This early phase of exploration is quite characteristic of archaeologists of the time, who were acquiring artifacts through private purchase while simultaneously conducting fieldwork and securing divisions of excavated finds.

Breasted was at first a reluctant popularizer of the ancient world through his books, including *Ancient Times* (J.H. Breasted 1916). Although he had been initially motivated to write and lecture for the public for financial reasons, he came to recognize the power and prestige associated with raising public awareness of the great civilizations of the ancient Middle East (Abt 2011). In part through his authorship of *Ancient Times*, Breasted captured the imagination of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who in 1919 helped provide the necessary funding for the founding of the Oriental Institute, enabling the planning of a new building with a much larger museum.

The scope of the Haskell Museum and its collections, galleries, and methods of acquisition, gradually developed over the decades as the Oriental Institute was founded and grew. In the immediate post-World War I period, acquisition through purchase, as well as subscription or donation, allowed for the collections to expand. For example, through the Egypt Exploration Fund, many archaeologically provenienced objects from a range of periods were added to the Egyptian collection. In 1919–20 Breasted also traveled to Iraq, Syria, and Palestine, surveying sites for future archaeological expeditions, while also purchasing objects (Emberling 2010), including a well-preserved clay prism of the Assyrian ruler Sennacherib (reigned 705–681 BCE) that now resides in Chicago. These are examples of how Breasted's institutional vision was closely intertwined with acquisition practices at the Oriental Institute. Breasted was first and foremost a philologist and historian, rather than an art historian. He therefore gravitated towards selecting inscribed objects that stimulated his own academic curiosity for the Oriental Institute's collections, as can be seen in the purchased Third Intermediate period statue of a priest of Hathor, Basa, which is entirely covered in writing (Teeter 2003, cat. 35). This was part of Breasted's deliberate vision for three Egyptian collections in Chicago—art for the Art Institute, anthropology for the Field Museum, and language and history for the Oriental Institute (Teeter 2011). Breasted's collecting practices also explain why the Oriental Institute's Joseph and Mary Grimshaw Egyptian Gallery includes a much higher proportion of purchased objects than other galleries: this actually reflects the overall composition of the Egyptian collection.

During the 1920s, the Haskell Museum was filling up and desperately needed room to expand. Many of the objects from archaeological excavations required restoration given their fragmentary condition, and they lacked proper space for storage and long-term care. The new (and still current) Oriental Institute building that opened in 1931 provided a solution to this challenge. The Museum within the Oriental Institute played an important role in that it could present the newly excavated artifacts from the Oriental Institute's past and current expeditions,

acquired through division on a grand scale. The expeditions were not only a necessary tool for making new discoveries and generating new collections and research, but also for raising its public profile and creating opportunities to raise further funds to support the Oriental Institute and its wider mission.

Breasted's progress of civilization narrative that characterized *Ancient Times* and other popular writings is one that dominates the beginnings of the Oriental Institute at this time. The tympanum carved by Ulric Henry Ellerhusen, over the entrance of the Oriental Institute building, is a projection of these foundational ideals. Called "The East Teaching the West," it shows a modern, Caucasian man receiving an inscription from an ancient Egyptian man, presenting an idealized and androcentric trajectory of the path of human civilization, with the ancient Middle East as the font of invention and knowledge (Figure 12.1; Larsen 1989; Teeter and Schramer 2008:17). This is in contrast to the more commonly established Western narrative, which presents the Classical world's role more prominently in this path towards civilization.

An expansion of expeditions took place in tandem with the design and construction of its new Oriental Institute building. New, major, and well-funded expeditions to the Middle East began in the mid-1920s and continued into the 1930s including: the Expedition to Iraq in the Diyala region, Megiddo in Palestine, Alishar Höyük in Turkey, the Architectural Survey at Medinet Habu in Egypt, Tell Tayinat in Syria, and Bakun, Persepolis, and Istakhr in Iran. These expeditions came with generous division agreements, bringing tens of thousands of ancient objects and field records to the Oriental Institute collection, as well as adding considerably to collections within the countries where they were excavating.

By the early 1930s, there were around 40,000 registered objects in the collections. Other important collections, such as manuscripts from Egypt, were bequeathed to or purchased by the Oriental Institute in the 1930s (e.g., see entries in Vorderstrasse and Treptow 2015). It is important to note that manuscripts have generally not been displayed in the museum or highlighted to a great extent beyond scholarly publications, and so have remained largely hidden from



Figure 12.1 "The East Teaching the West" by Ulric Henry Ellerhusen; tympanum above the entrance to the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago

Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago

the public visitor. Monumental sculptures and reliefs (often heavily restored) served as key focal points in the Museum, as they do to this day—including the colossal winged bull (*lamassu*) and associated Assyrian sculpted reliefs from Khorsabad, Iraq, the glazed-brick lions from the Ishtar Gate, Babylon (which came via Berlin), the statue of Tutankhamun from Medinet Habu, Egypt, a column-base from Tell Tayinat (now in Turkey), and a bull's head from Persepolis, Iran. Casts also play a prominent role in the Museum; for example, replicas of the Hammurabi Law Code Stele, the Obelisk of Shalmaneser, and the Rosetta Stone have been mainstays of the collections for decades and continue to play an important role in public tours and teaching.

The monumental sculpture was joined by other archaeologically excavated objects of art historical importance—especially the smaller scale statuary from Tell Asmar within the Diyala region of Iraq (Green and Evans 2015). Early photographs of the exhibition halls (Figure 12.2) show that, apart from the larger sculptures and casts, objects were arranged in a non-hierarchical fashion, allowing typological and stylistic comparison, which was quite typical for the university museum of its day. Displays of these smaller objects resembled the arrangement of objects in photographic plates in scholarly publications or site reports as a way to organize and present knowledge. Although a more detailed study of the specific subjects and groupings of objects is yet to be undertaken, this appears to be a representation of scientific objectivism and typology arranged by specialists for a



Figure 12.2 Early 1930s view of the Oriental Institute's Egyptian Hall from main entrance, with the winged bull at east end (P. 29038/N.15319)

Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago

specialized audience. This helped to instill an ideology of specialization, scientific knowledge, and authority.

A disproportionate focus on the institutional beginnings of the Oriental Institute and its important acquisitions from the 1920s and 1930s has in part contributed to a more limited appreciation of the period that followed Breasted's death in 1935. The Second World War brought about significant geopolitical changes, including the creation and independence of nation-states in the Middle East. This often restricted the division arrangements that had previously been so open in prior years in part through colonial, imperial, or political domination (Goode 2007). There was also less funding available for large-scale expeditions of the scale of Megiddo, Persepolis, or Medinet Habu after World War II. Objects were still being actively acquired through purchase in the United States during the war years, in the immediate post-war period and into the 1960s and 1970s. Some notable examples include the "Chicago Stone," a mid-3rd millennium BCE "kudurru" featuring pictographic script and thought to have come from Isin, Iraq (Green and Teeter 2013:44–5), and a well-known Achaemenid-era gold roundel from Iran (Figure 12.3 and Figure 12.4; Kantor 1957), which is further discussed below.

Some of the most important art historical studies on the museum's collections, including artifacts acquired by purchase, donation, and excavation, were undertaken during the period of Pinhas Delougaz's curatorship of the museum by research assistant (and later Professor) Helen Kantor between the 1940s and the 1960s. Numerous articles and notes with an art historical focus appeared in the University of Chicago's *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* (e.g., Kantor 1960, 1962). The publications of Henri Frankfort on the history of art and architecture in the ancient Near East have also remained influential since their appearance in the mid-20th century (e.g., Frankfort 1955), drawing upon key objects in the



Figure 12.3 Persian roundel, reign of Artaxerxes II(?), ca. 404–359 BCE (OIM A28582). Photo by Anna Ressman (OIM: D. 27509)

Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago





*Figure 12.4* View of the Edgar and Deborah Jannotta Mesopotamian Gallery with the winged bull at the east end. Hammurabi Stele cast in foreground, ca. 2014. Photo by Austin Kramer (OIM: D. 13279)

Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago

Oriental Institute collections alongside other icons in major museums, thus situating those displayed in Chicago within an elite art historical narrative.

The 1960s also saw a new opportunity to expand the collections through the Oriental Institute's participation in the UNESCO-led Nubian Salvage Expedition, which included a division agreement with the Egyptian government (Seele 1967). This resulted in significant quantities of objects coming to Chicago, as well as other museums in North America that participated in the rescue and salvage expedition, including the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York received the Temple of Dendur as a gift in recognition of the role of the United States in supporting the project. There were also significant exchanges between the 1950s and 1970s between the Oriental Institute and other museums, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the British Museum (Swift 1975). The Art Institute of Chicago also transferred and loaned objects from its collections to the Oriental Institute between the 1940s and the 1970s (Teeter 2011:312–13).

Since Kantor's death in 1993, art history has generally not been a significant research focus in its own right at the Oriental Institute. There are exceptions, including projects that have integrated art history and archaeology (e.g., Evans 2012; Garrison and Root 2001). Examples in the museum may include features on the production of art in ancient Egypt, for example, the ostraca, trial pieces, and the representation of the human form. Otherwise, interpretation has typically

focused what is represented, the function or meaning of the image, its date and historical relevance, and how and where it was found, rather than necessarily on development of technique, method, or connoisseurship, that one might associate with an art historical approach.

Subsequent redesigns of the galleries occurred in the mid-1970s, with a significant impact on the display and interpretation of the Mesopotamian collections (Franke 1977; see chapter by Lacovara, this volume). The last major acquisition through a formal division resulting in the display of selected material was from the Chogha Mish Expedition to Iran from the late 1960s and into the 1970s (Delougaz and Kantor 1996). The museum from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s is best represented by museum highlights publications (Marfoe 1982; Oriental Institute 1989). The most significant updates and changes to the museum took place between 1996 and 2006 (Figure 12.3 and Figure 12.4). A new wing that included a climate control (HVAC) system for the museum and research archives, additional space for object storage, a conservation laboratory, and a preparation shop, was added to the Oriental Institute building. Its galleries were completely redone, gradually, over the course of that single decade, starting with the Egyptian gallery, and ending with the Nubian gallery (Emberling 2009). This leads us to the description of the Museum at the time of writing in 2014, which continues to undergo changes, enhancements, and updates (Lindahl et al. 2016), as part of a Gallery Enhancements Project led by the current Chief Curator and Deputy Director for Collections and Exhibitions, Jean M. Evans.

### **The Oriental Institute today: Towards an archaeological narrative**

The goal of the Oriental Institute today does not differ greatly from 1919 in relation to its focus on ancient Middle Eastern civilizations. The Oriental Institute is described as “an interdisciplinary research center that integrates archaeological, textual, linguistic, and art historical data to understand the development and functioning of ancient civilizations of the Middle East from the earliest Holocene through the Medieval period” (Oriental Institute 2014).

More specifically, the Oriental Institute’s Museum and Department of Public Education and Outreach within the Oriental Institute “promote interest in and understanding of ancient civilizations of the Middle East, and their connections to the modern world, for a broad and diverse audience. In order to tell the story of the rise of civilizations, communicate the excitement of archaeological, linguistic, and historical discovery, enhance understanding and appreciation of cultural similarities and differences, show connections between the ancient and modern worlds, and highlight the research of the Oriental Institute: we preserve our collections and information about them; we facilitate and conduct research related to the collections; we educate our general and scholarly audiences through informative and engaging exhibits, programs, publications and website” (Oriental Institute 2014).

The regional or cultural particularism of the Oriental Institute, with its focus on the ancient Middle East, is at odds with the concept of an encyclopedic



museum (Cuno 2011). It is highly specialized compared with other university museums that may have a broader geographical definition of the ancient world and integration of ethnographic collections, such as the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (aka the Penn Museum). Therefore, the Oriental Institute Museum could be characterized as encyclopedic in terms of collections from the regions and periods that it covers.

At the time of writing, around 4,400 objects are currently displayed in the Museum galleries, covering the main regions: Mesopotamia (Iraq), the Assyrian Empire, Syro-Anatolia (Turkey and Northern Syria), Megiddo (covering Israel/Palestine), Egypt, Persia (Iran), and Nubia (southern Egypt and northern Sudan). An additional gallery is devoted to special exhibitions, which take place at a rate of approximately three every two years. The collections have also grown considerably due to systematic registration. At the time of writing, the museum has over 300,000 registered objects in its database. Around 100,000 objects (estimated) remain unregistered—bearing in mind that this includes archaeological material with a backlog of numerous ceramic sherds and stone tools from past expeditions. The Oriental Institute’s online database, [oi-idb.uchicago.edu](http://oi-idb.uchicago.edu), provides information on the registered objects and presents thousands of images and related digital publications on individual objects.

In the design and presentation of the recently refurbished galleries, the Oriental Institute is indebted to the work of museum curators Karen Wilson, Emily Teeter, and Geoff Emberling, and many others within the Oriental Institute, in bringing these to fruition. Karen Wilson (pers. comm.) provided some important insights in discussions on this topic, exploring the motivations behind the program of redisplay and the aims underlying the selection of objects and themes.

Each gallery has its own display that includes a chronological sequence, a proposed requirement of faculty-based teaching using the museum galleries. In addition to a chronological focus, there are also themes such as kingship, writing, and daily life within the Mesopotamian and Egyptian Galleries, and further subthemes that are specific to each gallery, such as the Assyrian Empire gallery, which focuses on reliefs that present tribute-giving scenes alongside the prism of Sennacherib. The thematic or discursive approach also helps to break down the traditional regional or typological approach that might be useful for only the most specialized researcher visiting the museum, and fits closely with its mission to “enhance understanding and appreciation of cultural similarities and differences, [and] show connections between the ancient and modern worlds” (<http://oi.uchicago.edu/about/oriental-institute-museum>, accessed July 5, 2018).

In addition to a clearer presentation of the collections with improved design and labeling, a strong guiding principle of many of the new galleries has been a greater focus on the collections from the standpoint of the Oriental Institute’s expeditions. To a large extent, this has meant highlighting objects derived from archaeological expeditions and providing supporting images and information about their find-spots and excavation. In some instances, the people who excavate objects and those who restore, conserve, or study them, may be highlighted. For example, there is a specific expedition-related panel in the Haas and

Schwartz Megiddo Gallery, a large scale backdrop photograph of excavations at Tell Tayinat in the Henrietta Herbolzheimer M.D. Syro-Anatolian Gallery, a description of the discovery and transportation of the winged bull in the Yelda Khorsabad Court Gallery, and panels focused on the aerial surveys of Erich Schmidt in the Robert and Deborah Aliber Persian Gallery. Photographs that document the recovery and restoration of the Tutankhamun statue in Egypt and the Persepolis sculpture in the Persian Gallery provide historical and archaeological contextualization as well as art historical information on recovery and reconstruction methods in the 1930s. Given the significant focus on the 1920s and 1930s in these displays, there is also a strong sense of nostalgia for this bygone era.

With the notable exception of the Egyptian Gallery and its high proportion of purchased objects, a number of objects previously acquired through donation or purchase that did not fall into the expedition narrative (i.e., “ungrounded” artifacts) were selectively excluded from redisplay in the new galleries. For example, a pair of unprovenienced cast bronze bulls with copper arsenic plating, dated to the Early Bronze Age and attributed to Anatolia, had been among the highlights of the museum since their 1950s acquisition (Figure 12.5; Oriental Institute 1989, cat. 27). They were excluded from the objects to be displayed in the new Syro-Anatolian gallery. The reason indicated for their exclusion was that they were not from an Oriental Institute expedition. Archaeologically provenienced objects were chosen for the display that focused on sculpture and metallurgy in Syro-Anatolia within the new gallery.



Figure 12.5 Pair of bull statuettes, bronze with copper-arsenic(?) plating. Originally attributed to the Early Bronze Age, ca. 2300–2000 BCE. Central Anatolia (OIM A30797-8); provenance unknown (Turkey?); gift of Dr. Hugo Weissman, 1956; height, 8.3–9.0 cm

Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago

Excluded from the late 1990s redisplay of the Persian Gallery were large quantities of unprovenienced ceramics and bronzes dating to the third to 1st millennium BCE. These objects are now largely in storage within the Oriental Institute Museum and no longer on view. The exclusion of these objects led to a significant chronological underrepresentation of the time period between the proto-urban and Achaemenid eras (ca. 2900–550 BCE). The third, second, and early 1st millennia BCE are currently represented by a single table case that contains archaeologically provenienced objects from the Holmes Expedition to Luristan, including objects from Surkh Dum-i-Luri (Schmidt et al. 1989). Objects not selected for redisplay included many unprovenienced Luristan bronzes acquired by purchase from the 1930s, as well as pottery vessels representing over two thousand years of ceramic technology and traditions. An apparent reason for the exclusion of the bronzes was doubt over authenticity of some pieces, although it is worth noting that such doubts do not generally preclude them from display in other museums (e.g., Musée du Louvre, Ashmolean Museum, and others). Future studies may be carried out on the objects, especially on their composition and patinas, to help determine whether they are consistent with the bulk of presumably genuine items within museum collections.

As the above examples indicate, context has had a higher priority and adds value to the collections presented—not value in a financial or commoditized sense, but an added value through highlighting the expeditions and presenting the way in which objects were acquired through careful and systematic archaeological excavation, through supporting images and label text that includes the excavated origin of the objects. This fits with the Museum’s mission to highlight the research of the Oriental Institute, while at the same time, provides a greater sense of transparency and authenticity and conveys trust to visitors. The photos and labels also present the rich history of the Oriental Institute, reinforcing a nostalgic view of its own past, as well as evidence that the objects were obtained legitimately along with vital find-spot information.

It is possible that the exclusion of unprovenienced objects may reflect an overall desire to align with professional standards and ethics. For example, the International Council of Museum’s Code of Ethics for Museums states: “Museums should avoid displaying or otherwise using material of questionable origin or lacking provenance. They should be aware that such displays or usage can be seen to condone and contribute to the illicit trade in cultural property” (ICOM 2006, section 4.5). In this sense, the galleries at the Oriental Institute present a distinct style that stands in contrast to many art museums, including those that continued to acquire and display antiquities or objects lacking a pre-1970 provenance.

As well as integrating the history of archaeological expeditions into its displays, the new galleries integrated interpretive aspects of the role of archaeology as a discipline. For example, the Megiddo Gallery’s stratigraphic display case presents objects in typological and stratigraphic sequence, from earliest times at the bottom (Early Bronze Age) to later levels at the top (Iron Age) (Figure 12.6). Its layering of objects over time is intended as a reference point for school visits to



Figure 12.6 Stratigraphic display: Haas and Schwartz Megiddo Gallery, 2016. Photo by Bryce K. Lowry

Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago

the simulated archaeological dig based on Megiddo, downstairs from the museum galleries within the Kipper Archaeological Discovery Center.

There are some exceptions to the principle of displaying excavated objects in place of archaeologically unprovenienced ones—usually in the case of objects acquired long before the UNESCO convention of 1970. The Egyptian Gallery continues to present a significant number of objects purchased by Breasted without archaeological provenience. The unprovenienced gold roundel, thought to come from Hamadan, Iran (Figure 12.3), continues to serve as a symbolic part of the Oriental Institute’s brand and institutional identity. It was selected for continued display in the Persian Gallery alongside other purchased Achaemenid goldwork pieces attributed to Hamadan, Iran (ancient Ecbatana). These objects are clearly within an exceptional category given that they represent highly specialized craft products intended for elite or royal persons—yet their presentation in the gallery is incongruous if considering the criteria of displaying objects obtained through expeditions. As well as being aesthetically striking objects, the presentation of the goldwork in the gallery also provides an opportunity to explore their art historical significance. They also make a striking contrast with the monumental stone sculptures from Persepolis displayed nearby. Yet what is absent is any discussion or debate regarding the ethical challenges of displaying such objects, or the absence of contextual information that would help underscore the importance of an archaeological approach.

Another exception, and an unusual case study within the Edgar and Deborah Jannotta Mesopotamian Gallery, is the cylinder seal of Bilalama, dated to the late 3rd millennium BCE. This “highlight” object was probably removed clandestinely during the course of excavations at Tell Asmar and subsequently purchased by the expedition from a dealer in Baghdad (Reichel 2003; Evans et al. 2017:36, cat. 11). The seal, which was matched to excavated clay sealings found in the remains of a building at the site, was subsequently cataloged as an object from the expedition connected with this find-spot. This is a cautionary tale of acquisition and archaeology that blurs the lines between archaeological provenience and provenance.

Another example of the archaeological narrative at work in the Mesopotamian gallery is the nearby presentation of the Early Dynastic period sculptures from the Diyala region, which prominently presents their context and archaeological discovery in a sacred pit in the floor of the Abu Temple at Tell Asmar (Figures 12.7 and 12.8). In tours, this is a frequently evoked lesson of the value of archaeological context, above and beyond the appreciation of the statues for their aesthetic value or visual impact. The importance of these statues continues to be presented in scholarly publications and art historical surveys over the many decades that have followed their discovery (Frankfort 1955; Evans 2012; Green and Evans 2015). Yet the ritual function of the statues, clothing and dress styles, and who they might represent, are more dominant themes in this current display. Their relevance and role within art historical narratives is underplayed.

It is relevant to note that the Mesopotamian Gallery of the Oriental Institute reopened in October 2003, just six months after the US-led invasion of Iraq. The subsequent looting of the Iraq Museum in April 2003 was, and will remain, a prominent news story and cautionary tale within the world’s media. This inauspicious event provided an opportunity to integrate the importance of archaeological



*Figure 12.7* Early Dynastic period (ca. 2700–2500 BCE) statues from Tell Asmar on display at the Oriental Institute. Photo by Anna Ressman (OIM: D.027541)

Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago



*Figure 12.8* Discovery of the Tell Asmar Statue Hoard, Iraq, January 1934 (OIM: P.26904). This image is featured in a graphic panel next to the statues

Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago

context and preservation within the museum. The preservation of archaeological objects, sites, and museums of the Middle East became an obvious connection point for many of the visiting public who had become increasingly aware of the richness of Iraq's heritage—sadly, for all the wrong reasons. The work of Geoff Emberling, McGuire Gibson, and Katharyn Hanson in the curation of the 2008 special exhibit “Catastrophe! The Looting and Destruction of Iraq's Past” had a recognizable impact in raising public and political awareness of these issues (Emberling and Hanson 2008). These are among the important lessons and examples of the continued value of archaeological context, as presented in museum exhibitions.

In 2014, I had the opportunity to work with Chicago-based artist Michael Rakowitz on a contemporary art installation of his work “The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist,” in the Oriental Institute's Mesopotamian Gallery (Green and Evans 2015; Roelstraete 2015). We displayed a selection of his sculptures made from colorful food packaging, based on photographs of objects from the Oriental Institute's Lost Treasures of Iraq database. These were objects thought to be missing, looted, or damaged from the Iraq Museum at the time of its ransacking in 2003. We chose to display them immediately opposite the Oriental Institute's objects from the Diyala Expedition, a kind of dialog between past and present,



and the connection between present-day Iraq and Chicago. This served as a poignant reminder of the fragility of cultural heritage and the fragmentation of cultural identity that can result from conflict and instability, as well as the importance of context and documentation. Through contemporary art, the Oriental Institute and its Mesopotamian gallery could be viewed as a place where ancient objects could be viewed as art objects in a contemporary setting and considered within a contemporary discourse. In institutional terms, this was also a conscious effort to engage with a growing program of UChicago Arts initiatives.

### **Visuality and context**

There are many positives to displaying an encyclopedic range of multiple artifacts from archaeological expeditions together. This can give an informative window on assemblages from a single site or range of sites in a region. Yet, what can often be underplayed is the visual impact and focus that a single object can provide. I suggest that a combination of highlighting of single objects, alongside non-hierarchical assemblages of multiple objects presented in nearby displays, can provide an appropriate balance to help visitors make choices about their engagement with collections. A more aesthetically driven visual language can provide appeal to typical art museum-goers. The presentation of highlighted objects for focused or attentive looking may in turn be more inviting, and by implication, less intimidating or overwhelming than displays that present multiple objects in assemblages. The latter may require greater prior knowledge to disentangle, appreciate, or interpret. The highlight can also serve as a gateway to adjacent non-hierarchical displays of assemblages, and also provide a focal point for guided tours. This desire to highlight objects on aesthetic grounds and to encourage attentive looking can be paralleled in the recent rise in popularity of the “slow art movement” within museums (Rosenbloom 2014). Smith’s (2014:113–18) research on the reception and impact of art museums on visitors is also instructive. His findings can also be applied to science, history, and archaeology museums that may contain fossils, archaeological materials, and inscriptions—i.e., objects that might not be visually appealing, but still fascinate. The overall “Museum Effect” is a “civilizing” one. Through a diversion from the everyday world, the viewer is able to observe and learn from works of art and the genius of the artist, or learn from intriguing artifacts that present a story. This can often be combined with the experiences, preconceptions, and viewpoints that the visitor brings with them. According to Smith, the visitor will leave that institution a more culturally aware individual with a different appreciation of society than they had before they entered the museum. The power of individual objects to captivate, impact, and transform a visitor, should not be underestimated—what adds meaning to the object for the visitor is its context—whether that is archaeological, social, historical, or material.

The display of ancient objects in museums can also spark ideas about what aesthetic or sensual values and experiences may have existed in the past, and how they might be appreciated in the present. In a sense, this goes beyond the

visual—and may extend to the other senses, including touch, smell, taste, and sound. Alfred Gell (1992) has highlighted the understanding of the social context of art production, circulation, and reception. Gell maintains that that modern aesthetic appreciation of art is itself a product of the religious crisis of the Enlightenment. Although aesthetic values may vary from culture to culture, including in the pre-modern era, art objects can be seen as secondary agents that can have ritual or expressive power, that can entrap and captivate the recipient—in this sense, objects framed within museum displays can have agency through key sensory attributes, whether experienced or imagined.

Alpers (1991), in her essay entitled “A Way of Seeing” (a reference to art historian John Berger’s influential *Ways of Seeing*, 1972), would frame a desire for highlighting objects as a reflection of the tension between *visuality* and cultural context. The Oriental Institute is not without examples of visual impact and focus, especially through its monumental sculpture from Iraq, Egypt, Anatolia, and Iran, as well as casts of famous inscribed objects in other museum collections. The desire to create an encyclopedic museum cannot pretend to fully represent ancient cultures, and chronological displays can never make complete cultural or contextual sense to the viewer, which is why thematic or discursive displays can work well in such museums, by making them more relevant to visitors.

For a typical art museum, fragmentary objects kept for scientific purposes could be seen as “bad objects.” The term “bad objects” has been employed by W.J.T. Mitchell (2004:166–7) in reference to objects acquired as part of a process of imperial domination, as well as for fossils in museums that might induce ambivalent reactions from visitors, while retaining a role as objects of fascination. Aesthetically unappealing objects, such as stone tools or fossils, can hold great fascination because of their historical and political importance, as well as for striking features such as their rarity or age (Mitchell 2004:113–17). This could also characterize the difference between how artifacts or fragmentary items are appreciated in contrast to the art museum style of presenting a fewer and finer approach to antiquities. Plaster casts may be considered “bad objects” in some art museums because they are replicas and not original works. Yet, in the Oriental Institute Museum, casts are actively integrated into the galleries—especially for teaching and public tours—combining both text and image, as the Hammurabi Stele illustrates so well. It is interesting to note that many of the iconic and large highlight objects within the Oriental Institute Museum are either plaster casts or heavily restored sculptures. While accompanied by historical, archaeological, and contextual information, the question of authenticity continues to be a challenge facing many visitors. What is real, what is not real?

Returning to the Oriental Institute’s permanent exhibits and the example of the Persian Gallery and exclusion of unprovenienced bronzes and ceramics—is it incorrect to present this material within or alongside an expedition narrative setting? Are these “bad objects” within the context of the Oriental Institute’s galleries? I would argue not necessarily, and with appropriate balance and selectivity, they could provide an ideal opportunity for display, interpretation, and debate. The objects are inescapably part of the Oriental Institute’s collections



and are also part of its history of acquisition of unprovenienced or “grounded” objects, which in its earliest years, was closely intertwined with the activities of the expeditions. A small selection of these bronzes in the Persian Gallery, following research to assess their authenticity, and appropriate conservation treatment, could draw attention to their striking visual imagery and power, the lost-wax technology used to produce them, as well as their lack of archaeological provenience. Such displays could explore what that means, and how and why such objects came to the museum in the first place. This would be instructive from a cultural heritage standpoint, as displays that highlight the role of archaeology can be balanced with accounts of how site-looting fueled the acquisition of these objects by museums and private collectors who subsequently donated them to museums. The Luristan bronzes are part of that story, and that story can be told in this public setting.

### **Concluding thoughts**

This essay has covered a number of areas ranging from the history of the collections and displays at the Oriental Institute Museum to the personal and institutional motivations behind their selective or inclusive presentation to diverse audiences. In line with the themes in common with this volume, we can see how the Oriental Institute Museum’s beginnings are rooted firmly within the Western framework of defining ideas about the ancient Middle East during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Museum has also responded to changing times in terms of archaeological fieldwork and collecting strategies, as well as responses to major world events and conflicts that have impacted the region and Western perceptions of it. The museum has therefore played an important role in framing a narrative and understanding of the ancient Middle East, and by extension, it forms a gateway to an interpretation of the modern Middle East.

A key theme of this essay has been a focus on acquisitions, collections, and selection of objects for display, and the potential tensions that can exist between art and archaeology museums. An argument presented in this essay is that displaying unprovenienced or ungrounded objects, at least those with a history and legal origin that predates the UNESCO convention of 1970, can be acceptable within an archaeological museum setting such as the Oriental Institute. In addition, the display of unprovenienced or ungrounded objects in ways that might be more typical of an art museum need not compromise the archaeological expedition narrative. In fact, the issue of provenance and provenience can be actively integrated into the display and presentation of such objects under the right circumstances. Surveys and focus groups at the Oriental Institute have indicated a strong desire by visitors to know more about the collections, how objects were acquired, and some of the object biographies of how they came to Chicago. Looting and destruction of cultural heritage in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, and news stories about repatriation of objects from museums, continue to fascinate the public. Museums should acknowledge this fascination head-on and engage with it. I conclude that in this period of greater transparency and the sea-change of many

art museums in their positioning on looted heritage and engagement with issues of acquisition, provenance, and repatriation (Green 2017), that the presentation of objects that highlight the value of archaeological context can take place alongside objects that lack a context, as long as they include a clear explanation of the importance and value of context, what information is still provided by the object, and what information may have been lost without its archaeological context. There should also be clarity on the status of an object if it lacks a clear ownership history.

So what does the way in which “art” objects have been represented in the Oriental Institute Museum tell us about the kind of culture this institution reproduces? I argue that the Oriental Institute reproduces an archaeological, scholarly culture—one that is guided by intentions to represent collections largely for academic use, with public engagement and consumption being viewed as a less prominent aim of the institution. Because the archaeological approach values objects in a non-hierarchical way, and because each archaeologically derived object represents just one piece of data used to help interpret the past, the desire to collect and preserve that data, however, fragmentary or visually unappealing, is highly valued by the scholarly community of practice that collected and preserved it. Every piece of data is as important as any another. This is a type of non-hierarchical objectivism associated with a positivistic, science-based approach to archaeology in keeping with Breasted’s early vision of the Oriental Institute—but one that is decidedly at odds with an art museum approach that can present an object in a material, visual, fetishized, or commoditized way. As we have seen within the Oriental Institute’s Mission statement, “art history” is presented as comparative “data” to be studied alongside textual and other archaeological sources. This treats “art” as a unit of analysis, and presents the study of art or visual culture in the guise of empiricism, rather than in terms of connoisseurship, aesthetic value, and visual impact. The Oriental Institute Museum is not an art museum, yet it contains important works of ancient art—some provenienced, and others not. Most importantly, the provenienced art objects are even more valuable and important because of their archaeological context and associated objects from known sites and strata.

In summary, styles of representation and display have changed over the years, but encyclopedic and discursive approaches remain alive and well at the Oriental Institute Museum, expressed through archaeological or scholarly narratives. These narratives may not, however, always be fully understood or appreciated by all visitors. Objects can still have agency, not only through the curator who presents them to the public, but also because they can mean different things to different people, depending on the experiences and attitudes that the visitor may bring with them to the museum. Each individual highlighted object may have its own very different impact when related to a wider archaeological narrative or larger-scale collection displayed in the gallery. The Oriental Institute serves a wide range of communities, from the fairly small ancient Near Eastern academic community of practice that actively uses the collections for research and teaching, to the wider public communities that visit the galleries and make

use of related online resources. These audiences may have very different needs and attitudes towards museums and collections, and this reflects in part a possible tension between scholarly priorities and the needs of the public. The Oriental Institute Museum has also been somewhat detached from the highly influential art historical community of practice in recent decades, and I argue that in order to present to and engage with diverse audiences and communities, there is a need to present objects in an aesthetically pleasing and occasionally hierarchical manner, borrowing from the visual language and approach of the art museum. Yet it is even more important to explain, or present through case studies, how such objects came into the museum's possession—an important step towards a longer-term process of decolonization that is often absent within the art museum setting, but more in line with anthropology museums. This approach can serve as an important gateway for visitors to learn and share knowledge about the past and its continued relevance today, as well as to understand the responsibility that we all have as stewards of the past.

## Note

- 1 The ideas presented in this paper developed while I served as chief curator of the Oriental Institute Museum, 2011–15. I presented an early version of this paper on January 4, 2014 entitled “Archaeology vs. Art: Display Strategies at the Oriental Institute Museum, University of Chicago” as part of the workshop *Art, Artifact, and Specimen: Approaches to the Collection, Display, and Interpretation of Ancient Objects*, at the Annual Meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America, Chicago, IL. This paper was developed further for the session organized by Geoff Emberling and Lucas P. Petit on Museums and the Ancient Middle East at the International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East, Basel, Switzerland, on June 10, 2014. Additions were made between 2014 and its submission in April 2017.

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## 13 The Middle East Gallery at the Penn Museum

A curator's reflections on  
challenges and opportunities

*Holly Pittman*

### **Institutional background: Nippur Foundations**

The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (currently referred to as the Penn Museum) is renowned for its collections of artifacts from the Middle East. Founded in 1887 in order to receive objects from excavations in Mesopotamia, the institution was from the beginning conceived as a repository of collections derived from controlled excavations led by associated scholars and archaeologists who were sometimes also professors at the University of Pennsylvania.<sup>1</sup> Until antiquities laws in the various host countries were changed to end the division of finds from excavations, most of the projects undertaken by the museum legitimately brought artifacts into the permanent collections through the practice of *partage*. The founding principle that the collections would derive from exploration and excavation has remained at the core of the institution. While no longer acquiring artifacts from museum-sponsored excavations, the data retrieved through current fieldwork is understood to have tangible value to the institution and to the study of the ancient world more generally as the primary evidence upon which new knowledge about the deep past is generated.

The museum was founded during a period when exploration of the Ottoman-controlled Middle East was well underway by European colonial powers, especially Britain and France, who were looking to secure the routes of access to their interests in the East. Important collections had arrived at the British Museum and the Louvre and had attracted public and scholarly interest in exotic cultures known only indirectly through Classical sources and the Bible. Efforts to launch an American expedition to the region were first realized through the American Oriental Society located in Boston, which sent out the first Wolfe Expedition to Babylonia in 1884, led by William Hayes Ward. Visiting many sites throughout Ottoman lands, he identified Nippur as a “mound of vast extent” that would “richly repay extensive exploration” (Ward 1886:20, cited in Zettler 2010, n. 10). In that same year, the first Assyrian monument arrived in Philadelphia. It was the large limestone slab carved in low relief with the image of a winged genie from the palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud. Discovered in 1853 and bought from Austen Henry Layard by an American missionary who sent it to Philadelphia, it

had remained in its packing box until 1885, when it was mentioned in a publication of the Numismatic and Antiquarian Society of Philadelphia.

A singularly important player in the Penn Museum story is Dr. William Pepper, a medical doctor and professor of clinical medicine at the University of Pennsylvania from 1876. A man of great ability, ambition, and vision, Pepper was elected Provost of the University of Pennsylvania in 1881, a post he held until retiring in 1894. In 1886, Pepper established the first professorship in anthropology.<sup>2</sup> In that same year, John P. Peters, an active member of the American Oriental Society, was appointed professor of Hebrew at the University. The following year, Dr. Hermann V. Hilprecht joined as professor of Assyriology and Dr. Morris Jastrow, Jr., as professor of Semitic languages. Cuneiform script had been deciphered almost 30 years earlier<sup>3</sup> and Assyriology was rapidly becoming an important specialty within biblical and historical studies. Pepper was determined to make the University of Pennsylvania one of the premier centers of Semitic studies.

In the summer of 1887, John Peters met Edward White Clark, a wealthy and well-connected Philadelphia banker, and told him of the possibilities for exploration that had been identified by the first Wolfe Expedition. Clarke was intrigued and offered to secure funding for a second Wolfe expedition to Babylonia if it could be sent from Philadelphia and be affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania. To that end, the Babylonian Exploration Fund was founded with Pepper as president, Clark as treasurer, Hilprecht as secretary, and Peters as director (Peters 1897:8). The University and the Fund reached an agreement, which was approved by the university's board of trustees, that all of the legally exported finds from the expeditions supported by the Fund would come to Philadelphia and become property of the university with the understanding that the university would find adequate fireproof housing for them. Because Peppers was already engaged in building a fireproof structure for the University Library, designed by Frank Furness, he was happy to provide the initial storage and display space for such artifacts. The Babylonian Expedition Fund sponsored four very productive seasons of excavation at Nippur between 1888 and 1900 (Kuklick 1996).

Among significant works of art, abundant ceramics, and important architecture, it was the enormous numbers of cuneiform documents, over 20,000, that were the most important to the emerging study of ancient Mesopotamian culture. These came from many historical periods at the site and exemplify numerous genres. The tablet collection from Nippur includes many examples of Sumerian literature including fragments of the Myth of Atrahasis and the Flood as well as the Epic of Gilgamesh. Shared between Istanbul and Philadelphia, the Sumerian literary corpus became the impetus for the initiation of the Sumerian Dictionary Project, which has been at the center of cuneiform studies at the University of Pennsylvania for almost 100 years. The Fund continued to support excavations at Nippur until 1898 when it turned over all of its assets to the University of Pennsylvania. The collections from Nippur were at first housed in the Furness Library, and many objects and tablets were displayed there along with the Assyrian Winged Genie (Figure 13.1). The museum returned to excavate at





*Figure 13.1* Artifacts from Nippur on view in the Furness Building, second floor, 1898.  
Photo by William H. Rau

Courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Archives

Nippur in the late 1940s and early 1950s, together with the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

### **Building the museum**

It soon became obvious that the Furness Library could not house all of the objects that would come into the University of Pennsylvania from the Babylonian Exploration Fund. Pepper began to develop possible solutions and in 1889, he founded the University Archaeological Association to raise funds for expeditions in the field and to construct a building to house the collection. At the same time, Sara Yorke Stevenson, a close colleague of Pepper, was appointed the first curator of the Egyptian and Mediterranean Section. Her arrival strengthened the museum's connection to the university and led to an expansion of expeditions, particularly to Egypt, which would provide objects for the museum's collection. In 1891, the university established the Department of Archaeology and Palaeontology as an independent entity under a separate Board of Managers that would be funded by the University Archaeological Association (Winegrad 1993:21).

In 1894, after two seasons of work at Nippur, Pepper retired from leadership of the university and devoted his full-time efforts to building a museum and expanding its research. Stevenson played a central role in realizing his dream of



a separate building for the collections. She proposed the tax-free acquisition of land from the City of Philadelphia for the purpose of erecting a museum, botanical garden, and park (without expense to the city) that would be open and free to its citizens. The land was purchased on those terms in 1894 and the first wing dedicated in 1899, a year after Pepper's death. It was called the "Free Museum of Science and Art" and Sara Yorke Stevenson was its "founder." The museum had its own board of managers, who provided the financial support. In 1903, R. Steward Culin, the curator of the "Oriental Section" was appointed the first "director" of the Museum.

Although independent from the university, the connection between the museum and the university was obvious because the land, the buildings, and the collections belonged to the University Trustees. In 1910, when George Byron Gordon (professor of anthropology) was appointed director, the museum became known informally as the "University Museum." In 1913, this name was made official by the University Trustees (Winegrad 1993:21). Gordon worked in both the New and Old Worlds, actively acquiring artifacts for the museum from Mesopotamia, Palestine, Egypt, and the Americas. Importantly, he initiated joint excavations with the British Museum at the site of Ur. At the same time, he oversaw a great expansion of the museum: in 1915, the Rotunda that houses the Harrison Auditorium in the basement was completed; in 1924, the Coxe Memorial wing was added for Egyptian Antiquities; and in 1929, the Administrative wing was opened. Gordon arranged for the installation of Assyrian reliefs from Nimrud on consignment in the Rotunda (Figure 13.2). Sadly, upon his death in an accident in 1927, the momentum to raise the funds to acquire these spectacular reliefs was lost. Rockefeller subsequently purchased them and donated them to The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Although the following directorship of Horace Jayne (1929–41) was challenged by lack of funding, the incredibly productive work by Woolley at Ur continued and Iran was opened to Americans for excavations, which vastly increased the collections.

Following World War II, the survival of the museum and its collections required direct financial support from the university. Froelich Rainey, a renowned anthropologist, was appointed director in 1948 (serving until 1977). With his appointment, the joint curator/professor positions were introduced, a practice that has determined the shape of the collections and continues to give the museum its strong academic and research orientation. During Rainey's almost 30-year tenure, the museum building, its expeditions and its collections expanded exponentially. The Academic wing was opened in 1971, providing much-needed space for the Anthropology department as well as the Museum library. In 1982, when Robert H. Dyson, Jr. was appointed director, the Board of Managers was replaced by a Board of Overseers, appointed by the president of the university. In 1990, the museum changed its name again to the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. In 1996, an ever-closer relationship was signaled by another name change, to The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Finally in 2006, its current (informal) name, the Penn Museum, has completed the integration of the Museum with the University.



Figure 13.2 Assyrian reliefs from Nimrud installed on the second-floor gallery on consignment to the Penn Museum

Courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Archives

## **80 years of exploration in the Middle East**

Between 1922 and 1938, the museum supported important excavations at a number of sites in Iraq and Iran that brought the bulk of the collections now held in the Near East section, all with secure excavated provenance (Figure 13.3). This was the heyday of early excavation in the Middle East, when most European countries were active. In 1922, the museum joined the British Museum to excavate at Tell al-Muqayyar (ancient Ur) and the nearby sites of Diquqqah and Ubaid. These were directed by Sir Leonard Woolley for 12 years and brought into the Museum's collection treasures from the Royal Tombs of Ur including the virtually complete contents of the burial of Pu-abu together with important ceramic, metal, and stone artifacts, as well as cuneiform tablets, from the Ubaid through the Neo-Babylonian periods (Figures 13.4 and 13.5). At the same time, the museum joined the excavations at Fara (ancient Shuruppak) as well as at Khafaje in the region of the Diyala River Valley, where the Oriental Institute was uncovering Early Dynastic temples. Expanding its interest to earlier cultures, the museum supported work at a small mound in northern Iraq, Tepe Gawra, in 1927 and then 1931–8, led by Ephraim Avigdor Speiser, a professor of Semitics in the Oriental Studies department. For several seasons, the team also worked at the nearby site of Tell Billa, which also had extensive Middle and Neo-Assyrian remains. Following World War II, the Museum returned to Iraq in the 1960s to work with the British School of Archaeology at Tell al-Rimah. By that time, the





Figure 13.5 The standing bull from the Early Dynastic Temple at Ubaid

Courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Archives

practice of *partage* was ending and soon only scientific samples and not artifacts would leave the country. The collection of Mesopotamian artifacts had reached around 40,000 items.

In 1930, the University Museum was instrumental in breaking the monopoly held by the French on archaeological expeditions to Iran. Curator Frederick T. Wulsin and his wife Susanne were sent to Tehran in 1929 by director Horace Jayne to negotiate a contract for archaeological exploration. The museum was in competition with the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago (OI) to secure permission to explore important sites. When Ernst Herzfeld was able to secure Persepolis for the OI, Wulsin secured permission to excavate the nearby Achaemenid city of Istakhr as well as the site of Tepe Hissar near Damghan<sup>4</sup> in northeastern Gorgan. Wulsin wanted to work at a smaller site and so he went north of the Elburz Mountains to Tureng Tepe for one productive season. He resigned from the Museum in 1932 and was replaced by Erich Schmidt, a young, energetic and wealthy archaeologist who would transform American engagement in Iranian archaeology. Schmidt worked at Tepe Hissar for two long seasons in 1931–2 uncovering both Bronze Age and Parthian period remains. In 1933, he began work at the medieval city of Rayy outside Tehran. In addition to medieval remains, he investigated the small Chalcolithic site of Cheshm Ali on the outskirts of the medieval city. Large collections from both Tepe Hissar and Rayy came to the University Museum (Figure 13.6). At the same time, Schmidt partnered with the Oriental Institute to join the Holmes Expedition to Luristan, bringing to Penn Museum a large collection from the sanctuary site at Surkh Dum-i-Luri. He left Penn to replace Herzfeld at the Oriental Institute as director of the Persepolis excavations where he worked from 1934–9. He was able to direct three projects at once because he commuted between them by an airplane (nicknamed the “Friend of Iran”) given to him by his wife. From the air, he took



Figure 13.6 Group of grey ware pottery from Tepe Hissar and Tureng Tepe, Iran  
Courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Archives

a series of spectacular and useful photos documenting the sites and the landscape of the country.<sup>5</sup>

In 1949, Carleton Coon, as museum curator and professor of anthropology, led excavations to cave sites of Iran and Afghanistan between 1949 and 1951, producing important evidence for early human occupation in Western Asia. Coon's success opened another position that proved transformative both for the museum and for Iranian archaeology. Robert H. Dyson, Jr., (PhD Harvard 1956) joined the museum and anthropology department in 1954, beginning a two-decade era of training American and Iranian archaeologists working under the "Penn umbrella" until the Islamic Revolution in 1978 brought American archaeological efforts to an end. Hasanlu was the most important of these projects, bringing thousands of artifacts into the collection (Figure 13.7). Dinka Tepe, Ziwiye, a revisit to Tepe Hissar, and Tal-i Malyan are all represented in the collections as well. The Iranian antiquities laws allowed for division of finds until the mid-1970s. In addition to the Islamic period material excavated from the site of Rayy, the collection of the Islamic period was made through acquisition in the early 20th century of metalwork, manuscripts, textiles, ceramics, and glass, as well as architectural elements. Today more than 30,000 objects are held in the Iranian section of the museum's collection.

The museum began excavations in Syria-Palestine in the 1920s and continued into the 1990s. The most important projects were at Beth Shean from 1921–33; Gibeon from 1956–62; Tell as-Sa'idiyeh from 1964–8; Sarepta from 1969–74; and the Baq'ah Valley in the late 1970s into 1980s. Many of these efforts were initiated under the leadership of James B. Pritchard. In 1962, the museum purchased



*Figure 13.7* Robert H. Dyson, Jr., holds aloft the famous Golden Bowl from Hasanlu  
Courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Archives

the collections from excavations at Beth Shemesh from Haverford College. And in 1997, another purchase of excavated material from Dhiban brought the Syria-Palestinian holdings to around 30,000 objects.

### **Brief exhibition history**

The Near East section has always had some small portion of its very large collection on public view. Until now, it was always presented by region. The Mesopotamian material on display focused primarily on Ur and Nippur, the Iranian material emphasized Tepe Hissar, Tureng Tepe, and Hasanlu, and the Levantine material primarily presented objects from the Beth Shean and Gibeon excavations. The medieval Islamic period material from Rayy was separated from the earlier collections and was combined with the Islamic textiles and ceramics in a gallery dedicated to “Mohammadan Art” either in the Harrison Auditorium galleries or in the courtyard off the main Lower Egyptian Hall.

After moving in 1899 from the stairway of the Furness Library into the main building of the Museum, the Mesopotamian material was usually displayed on the



Figure 13.8 Ur of the Chaldees gallery, 1926; Coxe Egyptian Wing, first floor, northeast gallery

Courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Archives

second floor.<sup>6</sup> Until 1927, Assyrian reliefs from Nimrud were installed there as well. At this time, Ur was on view in the first-floor Egyptian Wing (Figure 13.8).

In the 1940s, the collection was reunited on the second floor with a refurbished installation that included a Babylonian zodiac painted on the ceiling by WPA artist David Drinker with his assistants Frank Meo and John Sante (Figure 13.9). A central object in this gallery was the reconstructed Stele of Ur-Namma, which had been allotted to the Museum through *partage* in the 1930s. In 1955, a large gallery was opened in that second-floor space called “Tales from Sumer” (Figure 13.10), which included much material from Nippur and Ur. This gallery was refurbished in 1964 under the rubric “New Look at Ur,” while the material from Gibeon and Beth Shean was on display on the first floor near the Egyptian Wing. In 1960, “Art from Ancient Iran” was displayed in the galleries on the ground floor. In the mid-1970s, major renovations moved Ur and related material to the first-floor administrative wing.

In most of these presentations, the objects were organized by artifact type and labeled with basic information about date and provenance. Only occasionally was an attempt made at local contextualization, but there was never an overarching narrative to any exhibition presentation. In 1983, with the opening of the “Ancient Mesopotamian Members Gallery,” for the first time an overarching story of Mesopotamia was attempted. It emphasized the large narrative of the “cradle of civilization,” illustrated through objects from Nippur and Ur.





*Figure 13.9* Mesopotamian galleries in the 1940s with Babylonian zodiac painted on the ceiling by WPA artist David Drinker and his assistants Frank Meo and John Sante

Courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Archives



*Figure 13.10* Near East Gallery, 1955 (Upper Baugh, second floor)

Courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Archives



The Stele of Ur-Namma continued to be prominent in the gallery. The highlight of that exhibition was a separate display in an adjoining gallery of the “Treasures from the Royal Cemetery of Ur.” This presentation emphasized the aesthetic magnificence of Pu-abi’s personal adornments, as well as the masterpiece of the bull-headed lyre and the intricate and animated sculpture of the Ram in the Thicket (Figure 13.11). This gallery of the Royal Cemetery remained on view until 1998.

In 1987, the Members Gallery was dismantled in response to the need to conserve and study the Stele of Ur-Namma. Later that year, a gallery entitled “Tokens to Tablets” was organized by Maude de Schauensee, keeper of the collection, together with Robert H. Dyson (Figure 13.12). This gallery attempted a more complex and less teleological story, beginning with early village cultures exemplified by Tepe Gawra as well as the Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites of Iran. The prehistoric material was organized in a square defined by four vitrines in the center of the room and was surrounded along the walls by objects from historic periods of Mesopotamia on one side and with the Iranian material (Tepe Hissar, Tureng Tepe, and Hasanlu) along the other. The overall theme was increasing social complexity from the 3rd to the 1st millennium BCE, integrating written documents along with clustered artifact classes.

The Canaan and Ancient Israel Gallery was opened in 1998 on the second floor, where it is still located today.<sup>7</sup> The new installation of the Syria-Palestine and eastern Mediterranean material, under the working title of “Cross-Roads Gallery,” is projected to open in 2022. It will occupy the space outside the



Figure 13.11 “Ancient Mesopotamian Members” exhibition, 1983

Courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Archives



Figure 13.12 “Tokens to Tablets” exhibition, 1987

Courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Archives

new Middle East Gallery, providing an interpretive transition to the renovated Egyptian Galleries in Upper and Lower Egypt.

Beginning with the directorship of Jeremy Sabloff in 1996, exploratory planning for the renovation of the Mesopotamian galleries began. While “Tokens to Tablets” remained on view until 2006, the Royal Cemetery Gallery was dismantled in order to undertake important conservation work and to prepare for a traveling exhibition to bring the important Mesopotamian collections of the Museum to the American public. The traveling exhibition was curated by Richard Zettler, Associate Curator in Charge of the section, together with Donald P. Hansen at the Institute of Fine Arts, and myself. The collection traveled from October 1998 until 2003; the exhibition was seen in nine venues. The exhibition presented the most spectacular objects from the intact grave of Queen Pu-abi as well as the famous bull-headed lyre from the King’s Grave and the Ram in the Thicket sculpture from the Great Death Pit. In preparation for this exhibit, important research into both artifacts and the archaeology of the cemetery was accomplished. The catalog that accompanied the exhibition makes the Royal Cemetery accessible to the public (Zettler and Horne 1998).

When the traveling exhibition was brought home in 2003, it remained in storage for five years. In 2009, it was again exhibited, this time under the title “Iraq’s Ancient Past” (Figure 13.13). Curated by Zettler and Pittman, three stories were explicitly told in that gallery. The first was intended to bring the collection into dialogue with current political events surrounding the American invasion of Iraq.



Figure 13.13 "Iraq's Ancient Past," installed in 2009

Courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Archives

The introduction presented a capsule history of the modern nation-state of Iraq (Bernhardsson 2005). The second story was intended to place the excavations at Ur, and the spectacular finds of the Royal Cemetery into a story of exploration and excavation in Mesopotamia. The middle of the gallery was devoted to the finds from the grave of Pu-abi together with the spectacular bull-headed and boat-shaped silver lyres. The last story, located at the end of the exhibition, elaborated on continuing research, in particular, focusing on a discussion of the reinterpretation of Pu-abi's famous diadem, and the extensive restoration of the "Ram in the Thicket." The gallery ended with a meditation on the importance of scientific and controlled excavation for the appreciation of artifacts from the past, particularly in light of the extensive looting that had taken place in southern Iraq in the chaos following the American invasion. This is a theme that was also taken up at around the same time at the Oriental Institute Museum in an exhibition "Catastrophe!" (Emberling and Hanson 2008).

### The new Middle East Gallery

All the contributions to this volume begin with the nature of the holdings that make up their ancient Middle East collections. From there, some engage with current critical theories surrounding museums in the 21st century, while others more closely focus on the factors pertaining to their particular institution and collection. Several themes stand out from the extended presentation of the history of collection building at the Penn Museum.

The most important is that the Penn Museum was, from its founding, never conceived of as an institution whose first mission was as a “Universal Museum” (Cuno 2008). Rather it was an institution, initially independent and soon in ever-closer connection to the University of Pennsylvania, that sponsored archaeological expeditions seeking to explore the lands known from the Bible, and very rapidly expanded to explore and reveal new evidence for all ancient cultures of the Middle East. However, unlike our sister institution, the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago, the mandate of the Penn Museum, with 11 curatorial sections spanning the globe, was much wider, ultimately embracing the entire expanse of the human story (Quick 2008).

Another important defining theme of the institution is the core emphasis on research and field exploration and the fact that more than 90% of the Near East and Babylonian Sections’ holdings come from excavations. While there are purchased items in the collection, especially from Iran, where commercial excavations were legal until the 1960s, fundamental changes were made to the acquisitions policy in response to heightened concern over the damage caused by looting for the antiquities market that permanently affected the Middle Eastern collections. On April 1, 1970, the museum put forward “The Pennsylvania Declaration” which stated “no object would be purchased unless accompanied by a pedigree including information about the different owners, place of origin, legality of export, etc.” (Winegrad 1993:167). This document became an important model for the subsequent UNESCO convention on the Means of Prohibiting the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property held in the same year. The emphasis on excavation and exploration fundamentally defines the museum’s collections. Any interest to “fill in holes” to build a more comprehensive collection representing all of the major cultures of the Near East was extinguished by the Declaration. This means that the collections available for display in the new Middle East Galleries are anchored in controlled contexts. The archaeological projects represented did not seek to fill gaps in the museum collections, but rather, each was individually driven by the particular research agenda of the excavator.

While the expansive galleries of the museum were always filled with objects acquired through research programs, until now there has rarely been any interest in offering an interpretation that went beyond basic culture history. This undoubtedly reflects the fact that for the last 30 years, research rather than public presentation was the priority of the institution. New leadership in the museum has understood that public engagement and public education is a fundamental responsibility of the institution. The most recent mission statement states, “The Penn Museum transforms understanding of the human experience through research, teaching, collections stewardship and public engagement.” This has required an entirely new emphasis on interpretation, presentation, and education.

### **First steps to the new gallery**

While vague plans for new galleries had been discussed under each new director following Dyson’s retirement in 1994, it was not until the current director, Dr. Julian Siggers, arrived in 2012 from the Royal Ontario Museum that the

possibility for new galleries would become a reality. The Middle East Gallery is indeed the first concrete step in the transformation of the Penn Museum into a public-facing museum with galleries and programs intended to attract a wide and diverse audience. With the hiring of Dr. Dan Rahimi in the fall of 2014, also from the Royal Ontario Museum, the process of planning the galleries began in earnest.

One of the greatest strengths of the Near East section of the Penn Museum is the depth in domain expertise in all aspects of the collection. Ten scholars,<sup>8</sup> all curators, research scientists, and professors, are deeply involved in the process of planning the new gallery. We have been supported by several graduate student assistants and additional staff. On the one hand, this many minds, all full of information about their specialty, has promoted a great deal of heated and lively discussion. On the other hand, this structure has meant that there is a palpable absence of a single-minded curatorial vision that is more typical of museum exhibitions. In addition, among the group, there was a great range in exhibition experience. Some of us have had a great deal of experience both outside and in the museum itself, whereas others had never been involved with an actual exhibition before. This group, convened and led by Rahimi, met biweekly for almost a year and developed a list of themes that would be important and viable points of organization for the exhibition.

In October 2015, after interviewing five design teams, the museum signed a contract with Haley Sharpe Design, a firm located in Leicester, England, that has had extensive experience in developing and designing archaeological exhibitions. The museum team began to meet regularly with the design team, both in person and virtually, during which the exhibition, design, and interpretive concepts were developed and finally executed down to the final detail. The process was an iterative and cumulative one that involved coordinating curatorial visions with design realities.

The team deliberated with the designer about the overarching structure of the exhibition. Four distinct approaches were considered, approaches that could apply to the presentation of any collection: great works of art; organization by theme; organization by chronology; organization by region. It soon became clear that only a combination of these approaches would best activate the museum's diverse collection into a coherent presentation. While we all agreed that emphasis on great works of art would never be an organizing principle for Penn Museum both because there are not a significant number of outstanding works of art—apart from the Royal Cemetery—and because the orientation of the museum is toward the explanation of human culture through the lens of archaeology and anthropology. The other three choices (thematic, time, and space) all were inextricably part of any one object to be presented. After considerable back and forth, the team agreed that the best way to bring a rational organization to the collection which spanned time from before 8000 BCE to the 19th century CE was to arrange the presentation essentially chronologically. The next decision was how to break up this long chronological span. Because the fundamental strength of the collection is its controlled nature, it seemed obvious that we should designate a site (or, more rarely, sites) as the “exemplary” site for a given period or

cultural phase. So, for the late Neolithic phase, Hajji Firuz provides the most distinctive and significant material, including the world's earliest known wine jar. The Chalcolithic early village period followed, in which the Tepe Gawra—and in particular the White Building, an elite structure uncovered in its entirety in Level X—provided a diverse collection of artifacts that could be placed within their precise archaeological find-spots. This principle was followed through all three galleries down to the presentation of the medieval period through the site of Rayy in central Iran.

Having discovered a clear structure for the linear layout of the gallery, the next challenge was to find a story that we could all agree was both interesting and relevant to our potential audiences and one that could be told through our particular collections. First we explicitly defined our audience as the diverse Penn community of undergraduates, graduates, and staff together with their family and friends, K–12 students in the Philadelphia schools, the museum-going public (in Philadelphia, regionally, and internationally), and finally our peers: historians, art historians, museum curators, as well as research scientists and archaeologists. With those diverse audiences in mind, we turned to the story we wanted to tell.

### **“Journey to the City”**

Taking the almost 60 themes that we had identified in our early process, we were able to reduce them to five basic themes that could each be captured in a single word. Those themes are: *make*, *settle*, *believe*, *organize*, and *connect*. Through them, we seek to tell a story of human society over the course of 9,000 years in the part of the world that is now defined by the borders of the modern nation-states of Iraq and Iran.<sup>9</sup> Having agreed on the five meta-themes, the next and the hardest challenge was to find an overarching theme that would bind everything together. Increasing complexity, more distant spheres of interaction, and technological innovation led us to consider the processes and the varieties of settled life from village to town to city to metropolis. All of this is, we intend, captured in the gallery subtitle: “Journey to the City.”

In settling on this overarching theme, we were cognizant of the criticism surrounding the “rise of civilization” or the “cradle of civilization” theme of other Middle Eastern galleries presenting the Mesopotamian story.<sup>10</sup> Our collections allow us to tell a non-teleological story that gives space for large and complex settlements, co-existing with smaller-scale, less complex, but highly advanced communities. For example, the first room presents the early city-states of Mesopotamia and contrasts them with contemporary town life in highland Iran as known at Tepe Hissar and Tureng Tepe. In the single room, we compare contextually, for example, concepts of the human body and the divine by putting the worshipper figurines of Khafajeh within in view of the striking female and male figures from Tureng Tepe (Figure 13.14). These strikingly different concepts are contemporary, are equally compelling, and each speak to sophisticated, culturally specific ideas of humans’ place in the world.

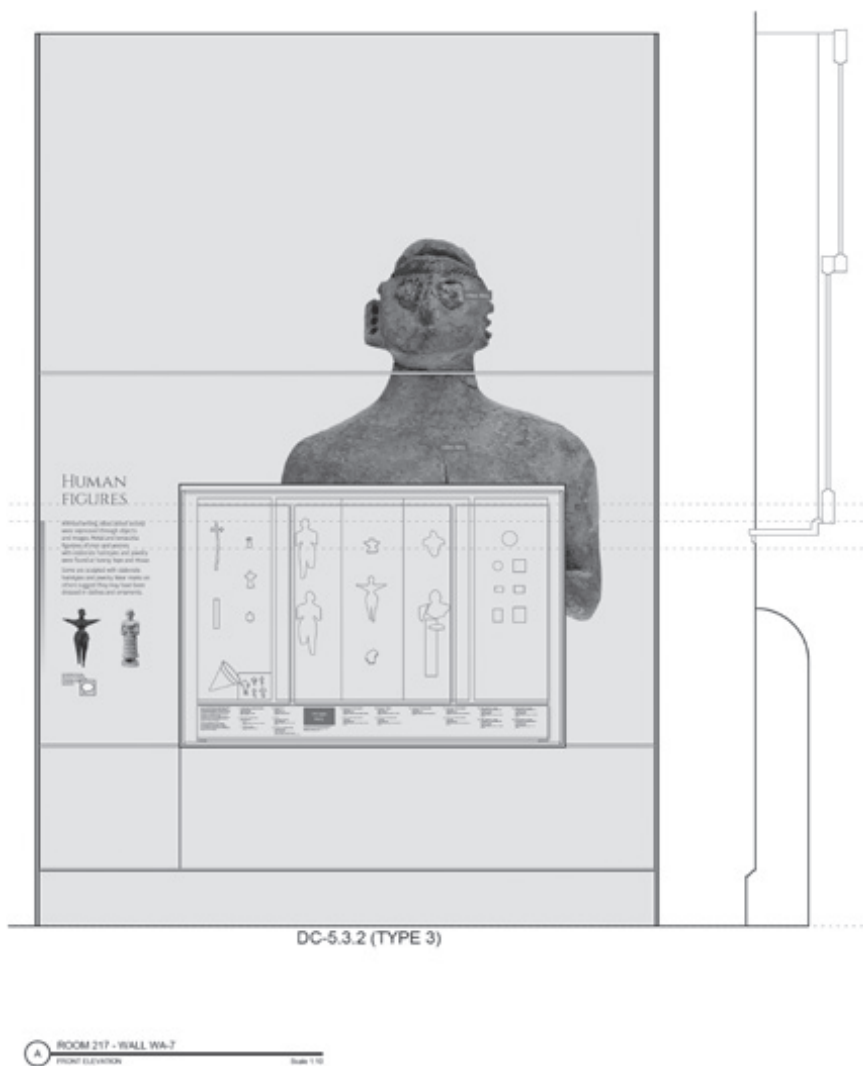


Figure 13.14 Elevation of the case in New Galleries where a comparison of Mesopotamian and Iranian Bronze Age human figures is made

Courtesy of Haley Sharpe Design

In the middle room of the galleries, the site of Ur is presented. The first half tells the story of the first appearance of dynastic rulership. It is in large part a story from the dead since most of the material comes from the Royal Cemetery. The introduction to that section focuses on trade and interaction ranging from Troy in western Anatolia to the Indus Valley and Central Asia in the east. It also presents through artifacts the interests and concerns of the elite class. Emphasis is on the spectacular beauty and interest of the material from the grave of Queen Pu-abi, as well as the



Death Pit (PG 1237) and the King's Grave (PG 789). The second half of the Ur gallery tells the story of the living as is known from the excavations in Area AH, as well as from the temple precinct. The Stele of Ur-Namma is presented<sup>11</sup> along with a display emphasizing daily life, craft production, religious life, and commercial life. Finally, the monumental building achievements of the Ur III kings are presented, along with an extensive display of the importance and centrality of writing to Mesopotamian culture and tradition.

The third room is divided into five sections each organized around a sub-theme. First are the 2nd-millennium Kassites and Mitanni, who continue the cuneiform tradition of the Ur III and Old Babylonian cultures. These are contextualized within the notion of nomadic or mobile peoples. Surkh Dum-i-Luri, the sanctuary site in Luristan, the horse-riding gear of the Luristan nomads, and the gold of the Scythian princess from Maikop are presented next. A case on iron technology provides a transition to Hasanlu in the second section of this room. The large collection of material from Hasanlu is presented to characterize a town on the periphery of two competing empires: Assyria and Urartu.<sup>12</sup> Themes of emulation, administration, daily life, and religion are developed through object associations. The conflagration on the last day is presented digitally in a film that includes interviews with archaeologists who worked on the project together with a photographic montage of excavation shots of the burnt buildings with their dead occupants.

The third section turns back to southern Mesopotamia, to the site of Nippur. In this section, two stories are told. First, the history of excavation of the Penn Museum in the Middle East is laid out. As described in the introduction to this discussion, Nippur was where it all started. The second story told through Nippur is of the Hellenistic and Parthian cosmopolitan centers. The excavations were particularly rich in these periods and they are rarely discussed (Zettler 1992). The fourth section moves into the medieval period and presents the commercial city of Rayy, which, in the 11th and 12th centuries CE, was an extremely prosperous and important hub where goods from Iran, Iraq, China, and Anatolia arrived. Coinage, alchemy, geometry are all elaborated through archaeological finds from the site. The fifth and final section of the third room presents later works of the Islamic period. In particular, fine examples of glazed ceramics from Egypt and Iran and elaborate works of brass, bronze, and silver are shown. In an enclosed space are illuminated manuscripts and textiles that require controlled lighting and flexible display for rotation.

One of the large stories that we tell within the context of "Journey to the City" is the fundamental role of interaction in the emergence and evolution of urbanism. While in some ways anachronistic, the term "globalization" captures the process that we see as fundamental to urban life. From the earliest villages to the Early Modern period there is an ever-increasing breadth of the connections that link communities together: from the trickle trade in obsidian found in abundance at Tepe Gawra, to the Middle Asian Interaction Sphere of the late 3rd millennium BCE connecting the Middle East from Troy to the Indus, to the Parthian period connections, to the Roman world which spanned from the British Isles to the Indian Subcontinent. The galleries end with the Silk Road and its maritime counterpart, which by the 15th century was literally global in scope.



In their invitation to contribute to this volume, the editors asked that the presentation be from the curatorial perspective. Because of the process described above, and given the nature of the collection, this Middle East gallery is not and never could be the manifestation of the vision of one lead curator. Rather, much like any archaeological project, there were throughout this process many voices, all with their own points of view and expertise. While this unique arrangement has been at times frustrating, it has, I believe, led to a far richer result than if any one of us had worked in isolation. We have striven to tell a single story but in a nuanced, informed and compelling way. Each object was selected with the overall message in mind. The design team of Haley Sharpe Design respected the depth of knowledge and commitment of the individual curators, and they adapted their modes of working to meet our complex schedules as teachers, administrators, and research scholars. We intend that this story informs those who engage with the complexities of human society and leads them to reflect on what we share with the people of the past. While much has fundamentally changed, many of the challenges facing today's society are similar to those facing the people who went before. Through their distinctive responses, we can reflect with greater awareness on the responses of societies today and tomorrow.

## Notes

- 1 This summary is based on Winegrad 1993 and Zettler 2010.
- 2 Daniel Garrison Brinton was appointed as professor of archaeology and linguistics in 1886 (Winegrad 1993:4; see also Kopytoff 2006).
- 3 Rawlinson deciphered Persian cuneiform in 1849; Akkadian cuneiform was deciphered by 1857.
- 4 This was thought at the time to be the ancient city of Hecatompylos, which was later determined to be at the modern city of Qumis.
- 5 Some of which are published by the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago (1940) in *Flights over Ancient Cities of Iran*.
- 6 In the Upper Baugh and the Pepper galleries.
- 7 <https://www.penn.museum/sites/canaan/index.html>
- 8 Grant Frame, William Hafford, Renata Holod, Philip Jones, Naomi Miller, Holly Pittman, Lauren Ristvet, Brian Spooner, Stephen Tinney, and Richard Zettler.
- 9 As explained in the beginning of this essay, for reasons of space as well as coherence of presentation, it was decided very early to open the Middle East galleries in stages. The first is the Middle East Gallery and the second is the Cross-Roads Gallery, which will present the excavated material from Beth Shean and Gibeon in a location that naturally links the Middle East Gallery with Ancient Egypt.
- 10 See chapter by Petit, this volume.
- 11 After the stele was dismantled and cleaned, it was not possible to put it back into a unified display because the limestone is simply too fragile to be displayed in vertical position. In 1995, we commissioned a digital scanning process by Ronald E. Street of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. From these scans, he produced a 1:1 replica in resin. This reproduction will be presented in the gallery together with the single most important and stable fragment.
- 12 Neither of those empires is represented extensively in the exhibition because we have so little material from either.

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# 14 The Archaeological Museum of the American University of Beirut and its educational role

## A case study

*Leila Badre*

### Introduction

Founded in 1868, the Archaeological Museum of the American University of Beirut (AUB) is the third oldest in the Middle East (Baramki 1967:7), after Constantinople/Istanbul in 1846 (Mendel 1912:xii) and Cairo/Bulaq in 1858 (Braae 2001:115). The year 2018 is its 150th anniversary. The museum was established around a core collection donated by General Cesnola, then American Consul in Cyprus (Woolley 1921, introduction; Mackay 1951:vii) to the newly established Syrian Protestant College, which American missionaries had opened first at Abbeye in 1866 (Makdisi 2008:209), later to be moved in 1871 to a new campus on the undeveloped outskirts of Beirut.

When Cesnola established himself in Larnaca in 1865, “Cyprus was then under Ottoman rule and there were no laws to protect objects and monuments” (Karageorghis 2000:3). Nor were there any laws to hinder the hobby of a private archaeologist like Cesnola. However, it should also be remembered that although Ottoman bylaws for antiquities existed as early as 1869 to regulate the search, extraction, possession, and preservation of antiquities (Eldem 2011:314), those bylaws were limited to seven articles. The exportation of any antiquities to foreign countries was prohibited, but they could be sold to private individuals resident in the empire. In Egypt, the first law banning the export of antiquities was instituted by Mariette, the French director of the newly established service of antiquities in 1879 (Braae 2001:115). But soon afterwards the restraints imposed upon the various European missions operating in Egypt became lax and foreign archaeologists were allowed to retain a good share of their finds. This resulted in a significant traffic of treasures to European museums, which lasted until 1912 when proper legislation was again enforced to the benefit of Egypt.

Like the Oxford Ashmolean Museum, one of the oldest museums in the world (1683), the earliest museums in Lebanon were private, archaeological, and university museums that were founded in different circumstances and with different historical backgrounds. They are the Archaeological Museum of the Syrian Protestant College (later to become the American University of Beirut [AUB]) and the Musée de Préhistoire Libanaise of St. Joseph University (USJ).

The Syrian Protestant College was created by American missionaries to teach the principles of the Christian evangelical religion (Dupont 2006:173; Makdisi 2008:6). Two years later, the college received the Cesnola archaeological collection from Cyprus. The collection thus formed the nucleus of the future AUB Museum, which has since expanded steadily through excavations, purchases, donations, and exchanges with other museums. Due to the variety of its origins, the AUB Museum evolved into a regional rather than a national museum covering Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, and Cyprus (Woolley 1921, Mackay 1951, Baramki 1967). It is therefore evident that the AUB Museum was not created out of patriotically minded initiatives, like most contemporary European national museums of that period, but rather thanks to the general cultural motivation of the university's founders.

Some nine years after the founding of AUB, St. Joseph University was established in 1875. Beginning in 1890, certain of the university's Jesuit priests explored Lebanon in search of Stone Age evidence of prehistoric occupation, but more as a hobby rather than systematic scientific research. Their collection grew with time and was ultimately transferred from a laboratory into the modern, well-organized, pedagogical Musée de Préhistoire Libanaise, which opened to the public in 2000 (Haidar-Boustani 2009:36). The St. Joseph collection is purely national and the idea of transforming it into a museum was definitely motivated by nationalistic tendencies among local intellectuals.

The establishment of the National Museums of Beirut and Damascus deserve special mention here and came about in a context whereby "Levantine elites reacted to Ottoman archaeological and museological activities in order to assert their own claims over objects produced or excavated within the region" (Watenpaugh 2004:192). The Beirut National Museum was the result of an initiative in 1923 by local intellectuals in cooperation with the French Mandate authorities. The museum was built in 1933 and inaugurated in 1942.

The AUB Museum, while charming for its time, had become in many ways outdated and unsuitable for today's visitors: a facelift had become a necessity at the turn of the 21st century. Hence, it underwent total renovation, reopening to the public in June 2006. In my opinion, one of the main improvements of the renovation has been the creation of a single circuit that leads the visitor through the museum, rather than zigzagging between the showcases, losing the link from one case to the other.

What does it take to renovate such a museum? There were two major issues to consider: the cultural aspects on the one hand and the technical parameters of space, climate control, lighting, and infrastructure on the other. A complete rehabilitation of the facilities was undertaken, with respect to the constraints of the historic building. In accordance with international museum standards, the latest technologies were applied to re-organize the collections and develop new and more meaningful ways to convey their significance. The solution to these challenges had been in the author's mind for a long time: first as assistant curator, later as curator, it was clear to me, more than to a generic expert in museums, what was most interesting and valuable to respond to the public's

need. We decided to divide the collections into two concepts: the chronological evolution of the archaeological collection on the one hand, and its thematic presentation on the other. As a result, the museum collection displays are currently presented along these two parallel lines: the pottery, which forms the largest part of the collections, serves as a timeline illustrating the chronology of the Middle East, and is displayed along the peripheral wall. The thematic showcases are displayed in central units under a mezzanine, which was created for this special purpose and to serve other technical necessities as well. In many international temporary exhibitions today, items related to the same theme but belonging to different periods are grouped together to tell "a story." Such thematic presentations play a similar role on a minor scale as mini-exhibitions within the AUB Museum.

During our renovation all the objects were re-shuffled, a bit like playing cards, re-arranged to fit their thematic classification, while others were selected for the peripheral chronological display.

*The chronological display* follows a single, linear path based on the progression of archaeological periods of the Middle East. Each showcase covers one period and is preceded by a large poster in English and Arabic introducing the main characteristics of the period in bullet points to convey crucial information to help the visitor understand the objects in their general socio-archaeological context: Who were the people? How did they live? What did they believe in? What was their language and their writing system? and so on.

Because the AUB Museum is a private university museum, and unlike a national museum, its collection mainly consists of acquired objects from various origins. These are mainly without provenance, causing difficulties in their classification. As Green (this volume) says, "archaeologically unprovenanced objects from the collections might be integrated sensitively alongside those that retain archaeological context."

The other issue to be taken into consideration is the visitor. Without visitors a museum cannot really exist (Dean 1996:19), it becomes merely a storage space. Museum studies today define the role and purpose of museums in terms of their relationship with their community. "Know your audience and market accordingly" (Dean 1996:19). Dean's remark here is commercially oriented and applies mostly to Western museums, whereby shows and galleries should generate income for the survival of their museums. In the case of the AUB Museum, this does not apply as its entrance is free of charge and, based on the university's principle, it is committed to equal opportunity and no discriminations whatsoever. The AUB Museum belongs to any society, showing no preference or prejudice toward any community.

Clearly knowing for whom a museum is being operated helps in planning its exhibits, but could lead to a case of bias and loss of objectivity. Therefore, I believe a curator must always keep in mind how to attract the interest of any visitor, he can curate different types of tours, be it for individuals or groups of all ages, for scholars and tourists, or any type of visitors with a common denominator which is oriented towards the goal of learning.

Surprisingly, university students do not represent the bulk of the visitors at the AUB Museum (as an Arabic proverb says, “The nearby church does not heal!”). From his perspective as AUB president, Dr. Khuri wrote: “It perplexes me how many students may go through an entire degree course without once stepping into our world-renowned archaeological museum.” Rather, the majority of the visitors come from schools or other universities, along with private groups and individuals. There are few international tourists, due to the political instability in the region.

## Chronology and the role of display

During our renovation, the museum’s exhibit designer based the visual layout of the displays on the tripartite structure of the showcases reused from the old galleries, with special objects showcased in the central space as a focus for the visitor’s attention. To mention a few examples:

In the Intermediate Early Bronze IV–Middle Bronze I showcase, the central pieces get all attention since they are outstanding and different from the common pottery presented in the rest of the showcase. The main objects consist of one jar decorated with two females and one dove terracotta figurine; below the jar is a fenestrated incense burner placed between two tall chalices.

In the center of the next Middle Bronze showcase are two fish-shaped jugs and two exceptional, very tall, painted incense burners.

Our second main concept, *the thematic presentation* is like a mini-exhibition about a specific, limited topic which has a story to tell. The display pattern here must take into consideration the limitations of space, the number of objects, and the amount of information required. In this case, the display emphasizes the relationships between the items on show, rather than the quality of the objects themselves. The visitor is unconsciously alerted to these interconnections and easily absorbs the meaning and significance of these objects. A typical example is the display of the murex shells and the purple dye extracted from them (Figure 14.1). Various types of shells, mortar and pestles used to crush the shells, and small alabaster bowls to contain the powder, are all assembled, along with short texts on the historical background and dyeing procedures whereby each type of murex produces a specific tint of purple color. Together they convey to the visitor the process by which this important valuable Phoenician purple dye was produced.

These thematic presentations illustrate the logical progression the visitor follows from one theme to another in a smooth transition throughout the museum.

While the display of masterpieces plays an important role in the chronological concept, in the thematic presentations textual and illustrative information are essential and more important in assembling the components of the story. Clear and realistic illustrations, combined with pedagogical posters, are supplemented with two other layers of information: short texts with illustrations and captions with red numbers. Thus line drawings, for example, indicate where the bronze votive figurines were located within a niche hewn inside a small obelisk in

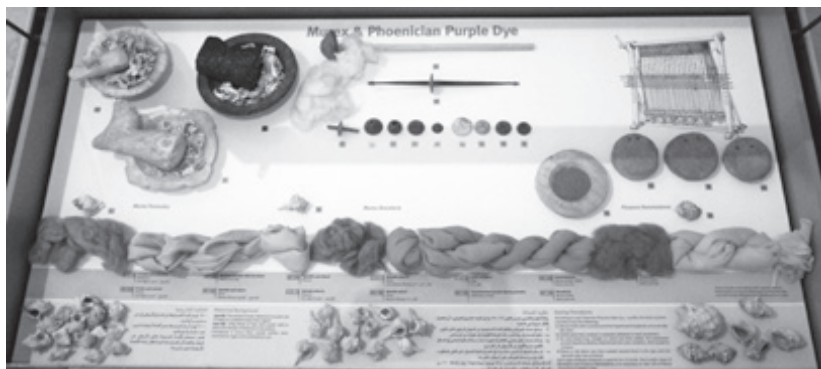


Figure 14.1 Phoenician purple dye displayed at the Archaeological Museum of the American University of Beirut

Courtesy of the Archaeological Museum of the American University, Beirut

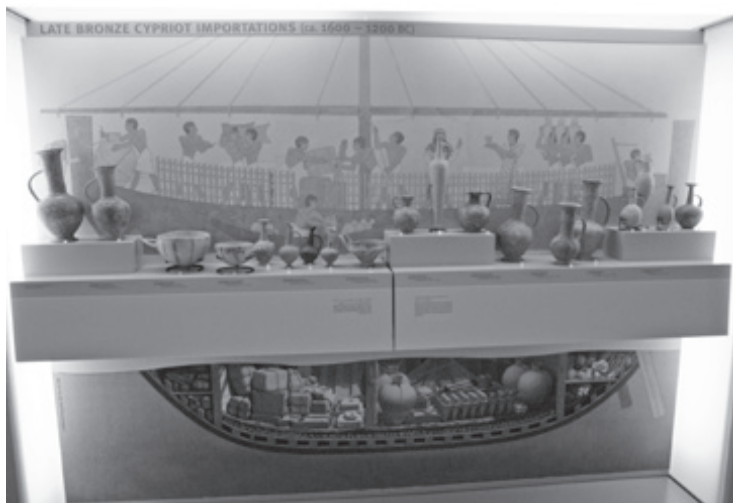


Figure 14.2 Uluburun showcase

Courtesy of the Archaeological Museum of the American University, Beirut

the Temple of the Obelisks at Byblos. Captions are also systematically placed to catch the visitor's attention without distracting him from the object itself.

During the renovation process of the AUB Museum, the curator (the author of this chapter) closely cooperated with the scenographer and the graphic designer; each understood the other's objectives with text/illustration being organic to the display. One example is the "Uluburun" showcase (Figure 14.2) which highlights imports from around the Mediterranean in the 2nd millennium BCE. The background of this showcase illustrates the shipwreck that was discovered off



the Turkish coast. The ingenuity of the graphic designer was to break down the large illustrative panel into two parts, separated by the display shelf, thus giving a living impression of the ship, partly above the sea, with the lower part carrying the heavy load under the water. The ship's last voyage was between Cyprus and Anatolia. Men are carrying objects similar to the items exhibited on the shelf: i.e., the displayed shaved juglet is similar to the white juglet in the opposite illustration. This interaction leads the visitor to look for further correspondence between the illustrations on the one hand and the actual objects on the other. These texts and illustrations are so attractive and easy to grasp, that while enjoying them, the visitor indirectly learns a great deal from them.

Other examples of thematic presentations clarify the focus on the educational role of this museum.

The *Prehistory* section—the first one when entering the museum—combines the chronological and the thematic concepts. It is constructed around Ksar Akil, the earliest site in Lebanon. In this way it indirectly acts as an introduction to what archaeology is all about. The methodology of archaeological excavation in stratigraphic layers is highlighted by a deep scale of 23 meters, divided into 33 layers. The chronological significance of these strata are based on the lithic material as well as the earliest anthropomorphic remains (a jaw dated to 40,000 BP and a skull ca. 35,000 BP) found within these layers.

The visitor is then oriented towards the successive periods of the Stone Age, starting with the Paleolithic period, which is displayed on a clearly divided board showing the evolution of man: his first steps, first sound articulation leading to speech, first tools, first discoveries of fire, hunting animals, food gathering, and so on.

This then leads to the next Stone Age period with a special theme of the Neolithic Revolution, a landmark in prehistory, where the main innovations are explained in a combination of displayed objects, graphic and photographic illustrations, models, and short texts about this major period. The main characteristics of the Neolithic Revolution are shown in a progressive way: domestication of animals, beginnings of agriculture, introduction of religious cults and, most important, the beginning of sedentary life, illustrated by a model of a mud-brick, mono-cellular house, the original of which was in Mureybet (northern Syria), the oldest village so far discovered and dated to the 9th millennium BCE.

Another revolution is the important development from stone to clay vessels which takes place in this Neolithic period. Pottery production is illustrated in a drawing: a man uses the coil technique to make clay vessels. A jug from Byblos is a good example of this handmade technique.

All these points are illustrated in a single educational presentation of a major period in history. Most visitors, especially school children, spend some time in this section and the young students are given flyers to identify, by multiple choice, some of the items they have just seen (Figure 14.3).

Another intriguing presentation is that of the *terracotta anthropomorphic figurines*, which are associated with the “mother goddess” theme. These figurines were in use throughout history and are thus displayed in a single, very large,





Figure 14.3 Young students answering the flyers

Courtesy of the Archaeological Museum of the American University, Beirut

wall-to-wall showcase highlighting the linear progression of the theme from 3000 BCE to 300 CE. In parallel, a bilingual window poster explains this art in all its diversity. Most early figurines, from hand-made ones in the 3rd millennium BCE to molded figurines in the 2nd millennium BCE, indicate fertility symbols (navel, breasts, and pubic triangle) associated with human reproduction and the mother goddess (Badre 1980:155–6). Isn't the Virgin Mary the ultimate example of this religious interpretation?

The visitor is then oriented to the fascinating theme of *Commerce and Exchange*. Early examples of exchange between Egypt and Byblos in the 3rd millennium BCE are highlighted among others by alabaster vases with hieroglyphic inscriptions. The scenographer has intentionally left a transparent glass separation between the two opposite façades of the same showcase as a hint to the continuation of the commercial exchange between Egypt and Lebanon in the 2nd millennium BCE. Once the visitor moves around the showcase, he instinctively makes the thematic link between the two different periods. This has been a clever scenography trick with a didactic purpose, as it keeps the visitor's mind focused on the commercial theme through the different periods of the Bronze Age.

The long commerce alley leads the visitor into the second main gallery of the museum, which is dedicated to the Phoenician culture. A large window poster introduces the historical background to the Phoenicians, while in the center of the room a large map illustrates the location of the main city-states which, because of their common characteristics, came together under the collective name "the Phoenicians." The map also shows the routes of the Phoenician expansion around the Mediterranean.

It was important to make the transitional link between the previous Bronze Age Gallery and the Iron Age Gallery. Such transitions always have to be taken into consideration in order to make the link smooth and logical for the visitor. In this case, the transition was shown by the objects resulting from the archeological excavations of *Tell al-Ghassil* in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon. This particular placement served a dual purpose, creating both a special and a confined unit for the only Lebanese site excavated by the AUB team. *Tell al-Ghassil* is physically represented at the museum on the one hand, while playing a significant transitional role on the other hand. The site was excavated between the 1950s–70s, at the time when the discovered archaeological finds were divided between the Directorate General of Antiquities and the project institution (AUB).

A central wall illustration, with text, photos, and graphics, outlines the architectural discoveries, marking the historical occupation levels so far excavated at the site: a temple and domestic settlements from the Iron Age (9th–8th century BCE) and photos of various types of burials from the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 17th century BCE). On one side of the illustration is a reconstruction of a multiple burial tomb with its accompanying vessels from the Middle Bronze Age, and on the other is a showcase displaying a selection of the material discovered in *Tell al-Ghassil*, highlighting the transition between the Bronze Age and the Iron Age. This is a key example of a fully documented thematic presentation which emphasizes the didactic role of the AUB Museum.

From *Tell al-Ghassil* one is directly faced with the magic section of the Phoenician civilization.

## The Phoenician civilization

There is a definite subjective approach to this section by using in the museum a special architectural space with arcades. Moreover, this Phoenician section is highlighted by painting some of its walls in red, which makes it stand out from the rest of the museum sections. Multiple illustrative backgrounds have been added in all the showcases. Put together, all these particularities combine to cater to the visitor's expectations concerning learning all about the Phoenician culture in its homeland.

The *Phoenician section* was extremely necessary to adjust misinformation/misconception about Phoenicia among the general public and Lebanese visitors in particular. After all, isn't the basic goal of a university museum to educate the audience with precise information often neglected to be taught, even in schools?

This was not easy to achieve; although Lebanon is the homeland of the major Phoenician city-states, nevertheless excavations in these sites have so far rarely reached the Iron Age/Phoenician levels, hence the limitations of the available Phoenician material. Gaps in the AUB Museum have been supplemented by textual, illustrative, and graphic information.

The idea was to group the common and major characteristics which brought together the inhabitants of the main city-states of coastal Lebanon under one

name, “the Phoenicians.” These characteristics have been divided into five sub-themes, assembled together in one gallery.

- 1 Phoenician purple dye. Different techniques were used to extract the purple dye (Figure 14.1) from murex shells, as described by the Latin historian Pliny the Elder: 12,000 shells were needed to extract 1.5 grams of this purple dye, making it a very expensive and luxurious item, and the most famous specialty of the Phoenicians. Displayed on one side of the very large table case are three varieties of murex shells—*Trunculus*, *Brandaris*, and *Hemastoma*—with the corresponding dyed samples of wool and silk.

Because of their special importance, these murex shells were represented on most Phoenician coins of Tyre, as shown on the other side of the table case. Ships also appear on the coins, illustrating the important role of the Phoenicians in trade and navigation.

- 2 The second theme, *Phoenician trade and navigation* (Figure 14.4), is introduced with a background of a photographic illustration of an Assyrian bas-relief from Nineveh, showing the exportation by sea/river of the famous Phoenician cedar logs. In 1994, an AUB Museum team excavated a Phoenician warehouse on the ancient tell of Beirut near the present harbor. Two Phoenician jars from this warehouse, ready for export, have been placed in the showcase. Next to them, an imported Cypriot jar found in the same warehouse illustrates the role of this warehouse in the import–export trade. Information about the importance of Phoenician trade is highlighted in text along with a photo showing a room full of Phoenician storage jars, ready for



Figure 14.4 Phoenician trade and navigation showcase

Courtesy of the Archaeological Museum of the American University, Beirut

export. The two sherds from the same type of jars carry the same Phoenician inscription, which reads LŠMN, meaning “for olive oil.”

- 3 A special space, one of the architectural towers of the museum’s building, has been dedicated to the third Phoenician theme, that of *glass-making*. A large window poster introduces the glass-making section, which began in Mesopotamia in the 3rd millennium BCE, and later in Egypt and the Levant in the 2nd millennium BCE. The Phoenicians did not invent the technique of glass-making, as is commonly thought in Lebanon, but they improved its technique by blowing it to create endless shapes and decorations.

In the first showcase, one can follow the development of three glass-making techniques throughout history, illustrated in the lower register. In the 1st millennium BCE, Phoenicians used the already known core forming technique. In the 1st century BCE, Phoenicians invented the blowing technique. The third technique, the Millefiori method (Whitehouse 2001:147), was also used by the Phoenicians. This developed further in the Hellenistic period. The chronological evolution of this showcase ends with a very large and rare Islamic flask, one of two in the world. The next showcase (Figure 14.5) illustrates the various uses of glass. Tableware was definitely the most common one. A reproduction Pompeii fresco shows Romans drinking from glassware like the ones on display. There are also glass ornaments, jewelry, and cosmetic containers.

- 4 The fourth Phoenician theme deals with *cult and religion*. A group of objects either directly or indirectly related to religion have been displayed in one showcase such as: a Phoenician priest in the prayer position; a clay shrine that may have been found in a temple; and small glass beads or amulets



Figure 14.5 Glass tableware showcase

Courtesy of the Archaeological Museum of the American University, Beirut

that were used as apotropaic talismans to protect against the evil eye (Gubel 1986:242; Haevernick 1977:152–231).

But most important of all is a human mandible from the 5th century BCE discovered in a sarcophagus in Sidon. Its six front teeth were loose and about to fall out, as a result of the gum disease “purea,” when a 5th-century BCE Phoenician dentist perfectly mastered the technique of using gold wire to bind the teeth together. The binding is illustrated with a graphic drawing in three stages. The technique kept the teeth in place even after the man’s death. This mandible is the earliest known example of dentistry and is the major highlight of the AUB Museum.

It is interesting to notice the use of the Phoenician alphabets spread all over the background of the cult and religion showcase as a transition to lead the visitor to the last Phoenician item: the advent of writing and the invention of the alphabet.

- 5 *The Phoenician alphabet.* Two showcases deal with the origins of Egyptian hieroglyphs on the one side, and the contemporary cuneiform writing in the Levant on the other. This showcase indicates the development from the syllabic cuneiform writing which consisted of ca. 700 signs, to be reduced to 30 signs with the great invention of the first Ugaritic cuneiform alphabet (14th century BCE) and then to the Phoenician linear alphabet (11th century BCE). A very clear diagram illustrates the chronology and diffusion/dispersion of this Phoenician alphabet to the rest of the world. This is by far the greatest contribution of the Phoenicians to the world.

A very rare and important Phoenician inscription, displayed in the AUB Museum, is that of Bodashtart, king of Sidon in the 5th century BCE, dedicating the temple to Eshmun, the Phoenician god of healing. The transcription into the Arabic alphabet, with the translation on the label below, allows the Arabic-speaking audience to realize how close Phoenician is to Arabic.

It has not been my intention to describe every showcase of the AUB Museum. Instead, I have selected a few themes to highlight the various didactic aspects.

## The Museum’s educational activities

In this paragraph are some quick shots of our Museum educational activities, run by young volunteers who, through their contribution, bring so much life into the Museum and attract extra visitors, of all ages, to these special activities, including monthly lectures and exhibitions—to name but a few: Arabic Calligraphy, including some early Arabian inscriptions; Jewelry through the Ages, using as a linear link the various representations of women wearing jewelry from different periods in the AUB Museum collections (Figure 14.6) such as a Middle Bronze bead necklace of a female infant discovered by the AUB Museum team in the Beirut Tell, terracotta female figurines and, of course, the famous 1st-century CE relief of a Palmyrene lady, richly ornamented.



Figure 14.6 Exhibition "Jewelry through the Ages"

Courtesy of the Archaeological Museum of the American University, Beirut

A more recent exhibition was "The Phoenician Man of Carthage," which the AUB Museum imported from Tunis. This exhibition is about reconstructing a Phoenician man of the 6th century BCE. A French sculptor used the dermoplastic technique for the man's reconstitution based on his skeletal remains, which were discovered in a tomb at Byrsa-Carthage in 1992. When the museum's curator invited this exhibition to AUB, the Tunisian director of the National Heritage Institute declared: "it is only normal that the first trip of the young man of Byrsa be to Lebanon, the land of his ancestors."

This was the first overseas exhibition to come to Lebanon.

The children's programs address a variety of topics: lamps through the ages, making mosaics, producing mummies, excavating in the field according to scientific methods (Figure 14.7). Children are first introduced to the topic in the museum, seeing all the objects relevant to the concerned theme. They then move onwards to the next-door, large, multi-function room, where tables and necessary materials are set for the kids to start on the manual activity.

More recently (2015), the activity "Gallery Talks" has been added to the museum's educational program. In this activity, a special collection in the museum is introduced in detail by a specialist to the members of the Society of Friends.

Last but not least, the AUB Museum created a special program for the visually impaired (Figure 14.8), where various categories of objects were taken out from storage. Most touching were the participants' remarks as they handled the objects. "See, this sculpture has eyes with pupils where the other one didn't have them!"





*Figure 14.7* Children's program excavating in the field  
 Courtesy of the Archaeological Museum of the American University, Beirut



*Figure 14.8* Special program for the visually impaired  
 Courtesy of the Archaeological Museum of the American University, Beirut

In conclusion, it is important to emphasize that the AUB Museum renovation was the result of several decades of experience that has uncovered some chronological gaps and filled them, responding to public interests and public expectations.

University museum curators, because of our research and field work (Badre et al. 2018) as well as long-standing experience, differentiates us from contemporary expert museologists. These result in a wide-scope grasp and vision of a culture that leads to a large outreach.

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# 15 Beyond display

## Curriculum and community engagement with ancient Middle Eastern collections in a university museum

*Annelies Van de Ven and Andrew Jamieson*

### Introduction

At the University of Melbourne, the Classics and Archaeology Collection is providing a model of object-based learning in which the artifacts, their display, and handling, function as bridges between various sources of knowledge in different fields and at different learning levels (Jamieson and Burritt 2010; Jamieson and Van de Ven 2015; Van de Ven 2015). The archaeology collection, focused around Middle Eastern excavations from the 1920s to the 1970s, features not only in exhibitions at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, but also in university teaching and learning modules, school visits, and public outreach programs. Through its foundation within the university's teaching and research interests, the collection is available for continuous interrogation, allowing for a collaborative curation that reworks long-held assumptions about Middle Eastern archaeological collections in museums as cases of lifeless artifacts (Pearce 1994:200). The model created in this context can serve as a guide for the development of object-based learning programs at other museums to ensure the sustainable long-term management of these Middle Eastern archaeological collections into the future (Kersel 2015; Jamieson 2015b; Jamieson 2016; Jamieson and Fitzpatrick 2014; Jamieson and Van de Ven 2015).

Using three case studies involving recent exhibitions of Middle Eastern artifacts—"Jericho to Jerusalem" (October 23, 2013, to April 6, 2014), "Mummymania" (September 29, 2015, to April 27, 2016) and "The Dead Don't Bury Themselves" (September 27, 2016, to March 19, 2017)—this paper outlines some of the ways in which a university museum can help to empower and inspire a broad spectrum of visitors through establishing an environment that facilitates co-creation and collaboration.

### The Classics and Archaeology Collection

First-hand engagement with artworks and objects in the museum setting, or access to digitized collections online, is a central life-enriching experience for students, staff, and the wider community offered by the University of Melbourne. There are 37 cultural collections displayed across 11 museums and galleries. The Ian

Potter Museum of Art, which opened in 1998, is the largest of the museums and it houses the University of Melbourne art collection as well as part of the Classics and Archaeology Collection. The collection of antiquities is assigned its own gallery and is displayed in rotating bi-annual exhibitions with anywhere between 100 and 200 objects on display at any given time.<sup>1</sup> These exhibitions are developed by a designated Classics and Archaeology curator. The curator is primarily responsible for the conception of the exhibition but works in consultation with the museum staff in the exhibitions, collections management, and public programs departments. The Classics and Archaeology curator also has a tradition of providing opportunities for co-curation for postgraduate students.

In June 2016, approximately 200 objects from the Classics and Archaeology Collection were relocated to the new Faculty of Arts building, known as Arts West, to fill the teaching and exhibition spaces allocated to Classics and Archaeology by the building committee. Here they are put on display within the building's open spaces and classrooms, where they can be seen by students, staff, and visitors. The objects are specifically concentrated around the object laboratories: hybrid teaching, display, and open storage spaces specifically designed for object-based learning (Figure 15.1) (Jamieson 2015b; Chatterjee 2008, 2010; Chatterjee and Hannan 2015; Duhs 2010; Sparks 2010; Simpson and Hammond 2012; Paris 2002). This allows for access to and exploration of the antiquities collection in the everyday learning experiences of students.<sup>2</sup>

The Classics and Archaeology Collection was founded upon five pieces of Egyptian papyri, from the site of Oxyrhynchus, donated in 1901 by the Egypt Exploration Society (Jamieson in press). After this initial donation, the collection expanded through the University of Melbourne's support of Middle Eastern field projects, which was particularly active from the 1940s to 1970s (Davey 2014). Owing to these partnerships, the Classics and Archaeology Collection includes artifacts from Sir Flinders Petrie's excavations in Egypt, Sir Max Mallowan's



Figure 15.1 Object-based learning in Arts West

Courtesy of the University of Melbourne, 2016. Photographer, Sarah Fisher

excavations at Nimrud, Professor James Stewart's excavations in Cyprus, Dame Kathleen Kenyon's excavations at Jericho and Jerusalem, and Professor Paul Lapp's excavations at Bab adh-Dhra, to mention just a few of the better-known projects represented in the collection.

Further material was added to the collection in the 1980s and 1990s when archaeologists from the University of Melbourne undertook salvage excavations in the Syrian middle and upper Euphrates River Valley (Jamieson and Kanjou 2009). To encourage international collaboration, the Syrian Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) went against its customary policy of keeping Syrian finds on Syrian soil, and generously permitted the archaeologists from Melbourne to take pottery sherd collections from these rescue operations back to Australia for research and teaching purposes. The University of Melbourne has collections of Bronze Age, Iron Age, and Hellenistic ceramics from Thomas McClellan and William Culican's excavations at El-Qitar, Guy and Arlette Bunnens' excavations at Tell Ahmar and Graeme Clarke, Peter Connor, and Heather Jackson's excavations at Jebel Khalid. Melbourne also has a collection of Iron Age pottery from Peter Parr's excavations at Tell Nebi Mend in the Syrian Orontes valley; and a number of Anatolian collections from Antonio Sagona's excavations in Turkey (Büyüktepe Höyük and Sos Höyük). The academics involved in these projects, while not formally connected with the museum, are often asked to provide specialist input when material from their excavations is put on display.

Through decades of publishing and displaying artifacts acquired through fieldwork, procurements, and donations, the University of Melbourne's Classics and Archaeology Collection has become one of the most accessible public antiquities collections in Australia (Yule 2003; Jamieson 2015a). The collection includes approximately 25,000 objects: 20,000 in the "teaching" collection, consisting primarily of non-accessioned sherds, and 5,000 in the "museum" collection, which is rotated through displays in Arts West and the Ian Potter Museum of Art. In alignment with academic teaching and research interests, the collection primarily covers the regions and cultures of ancient Greece, Rome, Cyprus, Egypt, and the Middle East. The development of the collection has always been strongly linked to teaching and research; access to the collection for these purposes continues to be important. With the appointment of a Classics and Archaeology curator in 2005, however, a new era in curriculum and community engagement was initiated (Scott 2012:135).

### **Case study 1: Jericho to Jerusalem**

The "Jericho to Jerusalem" exhibition was a key instance in which artifacts were selected not only for display purposes but as a teaching resource on Middle Eastern archaeological fieldwork practices and techniques (Figure 15.2). The exhibition, held in the Classics and Archaeology Gallery of the Ian Potter Museum of Art from the October 23, 2013, to the April 6, 2014, featured 144 objects primarily drawn from Dame Kathleen Kenyon's excavations at Jerusalem and Jericho.



Figure 15.2 “Jericho to Jerusalem” exhibition

Courtesy of the Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2013. Photographer, Christian Capurro

The objects displayed within the “Jericho to Jerusalem” exhibition came to Australia at the bequest of Middle Eastern Studies department lecturer Dr. John Thompson, previously Director of the Australian Institute of Archaeology. He provided financial support to Kenyon’s archaeological excavations in the Levant, allowing Melbourne to receive an allocation of finds (Davey 2014). As a result of Thompson’s efforts to build a teaching collection, 17 ceramic objects were received from several tombs at Jericho, excavated by Kenyon from 1952–4. In 1969 and 1970, the university received two further shipments of 113 ceramic objects from Kenyon’s 1967 excavations at Jerusalem, primarily from Cave 1. These consignments included terracotta figurines, clay loom weights, and many pottery vessels.

All throughout the development of the exhibition narrative, the curator and museum staff were very aware of the various audiences that would be attending the exhibition. Not all attendees would be familiar with archaeological methods, and even fewer would be versed in the particular contributions of Dame Kathleen Kenyon. The interpretive panels developed for the exhibition aimed to give visitors a basic understanding of these principles. The exhibition began with a short summary of Dame Kenyon’s career: her education, excavation, and teaching. Following this introduction, the gallery split off into two separate sections describing her excavations at Jericho and Jerusalem. Alongside the material from these two sites, there were panels highlighting the methods Kenyon developed while on site: perfecting the excavation of stratigraphically defined deposits (later known as the “Wheeler-Kenyon” method), as well as documenting

a series of more stringent ceramic typologies based on site stratigraphy (Kenyon 1960, 1961). In addition to text panels, these field methods were explored using didactic backdrops in central display cases that showed enlarged images of trench sections and pottery profiles from the Jericho excavations.

The exhibition was considered very successful, receiving coverage from the Sydney Morning Herald, the oldest continuously published newspaper in Australia. Within her exhibition review, art critic Penny Webb noted the significance of the ceramics on display, as well as the great leaps in archaeological understanding facilitated by Kenyon's research, stating that "everything you need to know about life in the Levant is in these vessels, sensitively displayed by [the] curator" (Webb 2013). Other reviews specifically commented on the interpretive paneling, with Melbourne artist Mark Holsworth remarking that they were "clear" and "informative without being too technical or overburdening the visitor with excessive information" (Holsworth 2013). These reviews reflect a positive engagement with the exhibition by the museum's general audience, as well as showing the success of the interpretive strategy adopted for the exhibition.

Displaying Kenyon's scientific contributions in an exhibition held on university grounds not only functioned as a learning opportunity for general museum visitors and external school groups, but also meant her work could be integrated into the university teaching curriculum. The "Jericho to Jerusalem" exhibition became a starting point for inquiry into the development of archaeological practice, in particular for students undertaking the undergraduate "Practical Archaeology" unit.<sup>3</sup> The subject introduces students to some of the main theories and methods involved in field archaeology, as well as ethical issues in Middle Eastern archaeology, such as the impact of religious beliefs and geopolitical influences on archaeological interpretations. Unlike traditional classroom-based subjects, "Practical Archaeology" provides students with hands-on experience in surveying, excavating, and artifact analysis. While these field methods have evolved since the 1950s, they were shaped by techniques developed and refined by archaeologists such as Kenyon.

These opportunities for learning outside the traditional classroom are often the most memorable for students and allow for a deeper engagement with material, especially the archaeological artifacts. While the "Jericho to Jerusalem" exhibition was on display, object-based learning classes were presented in teaching spaces adjacent to the Classics and Archaeology Gallery in the Ian Potter Museum of Art. Using the various artifacts and associated archives and documentation (photos, publications, correspondence and notes) as teaching devices, students in Australia were able to connect with archaeological discoveries and field techniques of archaeologists working in the Middle East, and particularly the career of Dame Kathleen Kenyon, arguably one of the most influential archaeologists of the 20th century (Davis 2008).<sup>4</sup> This provided students with a unique opportunity to access three different learning approaches—museological, archaeological, and historical—within the same class and learning environment.<sup>5</sup> This integrated approach proved to be the most rewarding part of the

learning experience, a sentiment reflected in comments in the end-of-term Student Experience Survey results for subjects with object-based and museum-based learning components like “Practical Archaeology,” “Egypt under the Pharaohs,” and “Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.” The comment of one student enrolled in “Practical Archaeology” during the installation period of the “Jericho to Jerusalem” exhibition in 2014 is typical of the student response:

I just cannot go past the immense aid the practical exercises were toward LEARNING. As a uni student, I found all other subjects at Melbourne to be so “abstract” and “intellectual” as to be more about trying to keep awake and “translate” the ideas from lectures and readings to something that actually meant something to me than it was about the actual subject matter. It is almost as if there is some school of teaching which says that if something isn’t boring or “literary” it can’t be educational. This subject proves this is just not true.  
(SES ANCW30023 2014)

Student feedback on learning as facilitated by exhibitions like “Jericho to Jerusalem” shows the depth of engagement that such alternative object-based and museum-based opportunities provide. This learning experience goes beyond the content of the single exhibition, in this case the legacy of Dame Kathleen Kenyon, to the development of wider analytical skills connected to the field of Middle Eastern archaeology. In this respect “Jericho to Jerusalem” was not only a successful museum display piece providing historical insight, but also an effective pedagogical tool.

## Case study 2: Mummymania

The second case study, “Mummymania,” displayed from September 19, 2015, to April 17, 2016, was conceptualized as a collaborative installation across a number of collections and organizations (Figure 15.3). The widespread fascination with mummies influenced the development of the “Mummymania” exhibition, which focused on the figure of the Egyptian mummy and its role within the themes of life, death, resurrection, and immortality. Ranging from the mummy’s original role in ancient Egyptian funerary practices, to its importance in early scientific investigations into ancient disease and medicine and its popular reception as a malevolent Hollywood monster-figure, the exhibition looked at the changing perception of the mummy over time (Brier 2013; Day 2006; Meskell 2004).

The exhibition purposefully included traditional Egyptian artifacts alongside works that highlighted the scientific examination of mummies and items related to the reception of ancient Egypt and Egyptian archaeology. This curatorial approach aimed to attract a public audience beyond the normal visitation to exhibitions in the Classics and Archaeology Gallery, thus bringing information about ancient Egypt, Melbourne’s Egyptological collections, and the ethical issues concerning the display of human remains to a wider audience.



*Figure 15.3 “Mummymania” exhibition*

Courtesy of the Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2015. Photographer, Christian Capurro

In order to display a well-rounded selection of Egyptian material, the exhibition curator collaborated with other Melbourne-based museums and collections. Objects from the Classics and Archaeology Collection only made up about 30% of the exhibit, with the biggest contribution, of over 70 items, coming from the Dodgson Collection of Egyptian Antiquities at the University of Melbourne’s Queen’s College. Other contributions included photographs of mummy unwrapping events from the University of Manchester in 1908 and 1975, a mummified head and foot from the Harry Brookes Allen Museum of Anatomy and Pathology, a Third Intermediate Period painted sarcophagus of the temple official Tamenkhamun from Museums Victoria, and a generous loan of human and animal mummified material from the Archaeological Institute of Australia. The Potter’s active efforts to integrate the community into the development of exhibits also encouraged loans from private collections of works that are not commonly on public display. The collaborative nature of the exhibition also situated the University of Melbourne’s own Egyptian artifacts within a wider context of Australian and international trends in the fascination with Egypt (Jamieson *in press*).

The content of the “Mummymania” exhibition was intentionally aligned with the University of Melbourne’s first-year Ancient World Studies subject on “Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.” In 2016, tutors for this subject were able to hold seminars in the “Mummymania” exhibition on mummified objects and the mummification process, ancient Egyptian afterlife beliefs, the history of the exploration of Egypt, the use of mummies in medicine, the scientific analysis of



tissue, including the use of CAT scanning in order to understand ancient disease, as well as the complex ethical problems that surround displaying human remains in a respectful manner (Tully 2015). This last topic is especially significant in an Australian context, as many Indigenous groups have to struggle extensively with museums in order to regain the remains of their ancestors, often for reburial, which denies the scholar further opportunities for study and research. This issue is less overt in the case of Egyptian mummies. There is little objection to the practice from the population of modern Egypt, and for visitors the antiquity and exotic origins of the mummies can sometimes obscure the fact that they are the remains of real people (Riggs 2014).

While the display of human remains is still contested in some cases, they are often perceived as the highlight of an exhibition or a museum. An English Heritage study on displays of human remains showed very positive visitor responses, with 87% agreeing that such displays “help the public understand how people have lived in the past” (BDRC 2009). However, a quarter of the interview sample also stated that displaying human burials and bones in a museum “appeals to sensationalism rather than intellectual curiosity” (BDRC 2009). This shows two often conflicting trends in display strategies, those of education and entertainment. While most curators aim for a visitor experience that lies between the two extremes, there is a danger with popular topics to lean too far in either direction.

The “Mummymania” exhibition was further designed to foreground problematic practices in the history of Egyptological displays by including information on private collecting practices, unprovenanced acquisitions, and the unwrapping of mummies as a public spectacle in the 19th and 20th centuries. These are aspects which are often ignored in exhibitions, as they raise uncomfortable questions for many museum professionals. Beyond this, film posters of mummy related horror movies were displayed in order to track the public perception of mummies in media and popular culture, where they were transformed from benevolent and protective figures to the monsters of nightmares. Movie screenings also became part of the community engagement within the exhibition, alongside a well-attended public symposium.

The “Mummymania” exhibition revealed how museums can attract large audiences in a very open way without compromising their institutional integrity (Paris 2006), as indicated by visitation statistics to the Classics and Archaeology Gallery. By combining popular interest with ethical messages, the museum can use objects and exhibitions to gain traction with wider communities and raise awareness of deep-seated museological issues. At the University of Melbourne, visitor numbers and exhibition reviews reflect the success of this curatorial approach (Jones 2015). In using materials that were highly recognizable for visitors such as sarcophagi and pharaonic burial paraphernalia associated with mummification, “Mummymania” succeeded in attracting a broad audience rather than a select number of specialists or experts, an issue that the museum had struggled with in the past. Through object labeling, text panels, books, images, and multimedia, the exhibition built upon common ground to create informative narratives that inspired and sparked curiosity among its diverse visitation.



### Case study 3: The Dead Don't Bury Themselves

The final case study, “The Dead Don’t Bury Themselves” exhibition, featured 44 Early Bronze Age (EB I) vessels from tomb A72 South at Bab adh-Dhra, as well as a number of other Bronze Age objects from the southern Levant (Figure 15.4) (Schaub and Rast 1989). On display in the Classics and Archaeology Gallery from September 17, 2016, to March 19, 2017, this exhibition expanded on the ethical issues touched on in earlier exhibitions. The objects from Bab adh-Dhra offered multiple levels for interpretation, reflecting the evolving life of an archaeological object from its original context of use, to its excavation and its place within the museum, through its management and display within a wider collection. The aim was to situate the objects in this evolving narrative, as well as to allow visitors to consider what a collection like Bab adh-Dhra might be able to reveal not just about the archaeology of death, but also about current attitudes to dying and disposal of the dead.

Alongside the Bab adh-Dhra material were Bronze Age objects from a number of other cemeteries and tombs in the southern Levant, including items from Tell Ajjul, Tell Far’ah, Lachish, and Megiddo. The selected objects were typical of grave goods placed in early burials and may have been directly associated with the identity of the deceased as well as that of their community, reinforcing the social structures and belief systems of the living. The exhibition also included five skulls from Jericho, on loan from the Australian Institute of Archaeology. These skulls highlighted the corporeality of death, as well as the process of

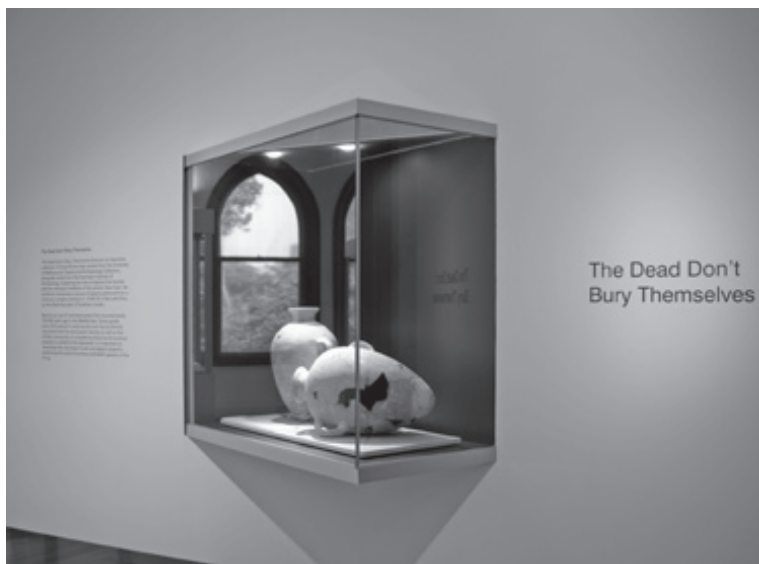


Figure 15.4 “The Dead Don’t Bury Themselves” exhibition

Courtesy of the Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2016. Photographer, Christian Capurro

archaeological excavation and the changing standards of archaeological recording for human remains.

Bab adh-Dhra, the primary site featured in the exhibition, provided opportunities for the consideration of a range of issues covering the looting and subsequent excavation and post-excavation management of the site's artifact assemblage. In the 1950s, quantities of pottery, reportedly from the Dead Sea area, were appearing in antiquities shops in Jerusalem. In the early 1960s, Professor Paul Lapp discovered that objects had been taken from robbed tombs at Bab adh-Dhra (Kersel and Chesson 2013:680). To preserve the site and its history, Lapp directed three seasons of excavation at Bab adh-Dhra between 1965 and 1967 (Lapp 1968). When he died unexpectedly in 1970 (Hillers 1970), he left behind a mass of material without having been able to develop a long-term storage plan. This problem was compounded when archaeologists Walter Rast and R. Thomas Schaub applied for permission to renew excavations at the site from 1975 (Kersel 2015). Their new investigations unearthed thousands of additional pots, presenting the Jordanian authorities with a storage dilemma on a larger scale than ever before.

A solution to the curation crisis presented by Bab adh-Dhra was found in 1977, when Nancy Lapp, the chief ceramicist on site, devised a scheme whereby tomb groups from the original Lapp excavations would be distributed to interested American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR) member institutions. The University of Melbourne was amongst these, and purchased tomb A72 South in 1978. All recipients had to agree to keep their assemblages intact as a single unit, display them publicly with attribution and make them available for teaching and research (Kersel 2015). Correspondence and documentation associated with this exchange was also purposefully included in the exhibition "The Dead Don't Bury Themselves" to further highlight the historical and archaeological significance of this narrative to Melbourne's strategies of Middle Eastern curation and teaching. As an exhibition including material from the site of Bab adh-Dhra, "The Dead Don't Bury Themselves" responds to what Kersel and Chesson describe as "the complex interplay between archaeological research into mortuary practices and ancient and modern looting of cemeteries and tombs [creating] challenging methodological and ethical situations for archaeologists investigating the past" (Kersel and Chesson 2013:677).

As many archaeologists struggle to find stable sources of funding for long-term excavations, the storage of artifacts uncovered within those excavations has been of secondary concern, often not extensively considered until after the fieldwork has concluded. This has led to an overabundance of materials hidden away in overcrowded storage facilities with little attention paid to their curation and no long-term management plan. In her article on "Solving the Archaeological Curation Crisis," Kersel states that the innovative proposal that Nancy Lapp developed for the Bab adh-Dhra collection may provide an answer, as it allows for wider dissemination of artifacts and access to them, with a focus on teaching and outreach (Kersel 2015; Jamieson 2015b). "The Dead Don't Bury Themselves" installation fulfilled the obligations to exhibit the Bab adh-Dhra material and to allow students and visitors to learn about its context of use, excavation, preservation, and

display. The exhibition foregrounded the fact that objects are not static; they are animated by our ongoing relations with them, and they contain ample information about the past and present cultures within which they reside.

In many large museums, not all object stories can be shared, as many artifacts that are not part of the permanent display collection are effectively reburied within storerooms (Brusius 2013, 2015; Brusius and Singh in press). University museums provide a way to embrace the possibilities of Nancy Lapp's innovative engagement-oriented approach, through their focus on teaching and outreach—in other words, their commitment to curriculum and community engagement. In the case of "The Dead Don't Bury Themselves" exhibition, this strategy took an interdisciplinary form; scholars from anthropology and computer science contributed alongside archaeologists to the conceptualization of the exhibition and its dissemination through public events, such as a related symposium that incorporated themes ranging from ancient burial practices to death in a virtual world. In her exhibition opening address, anthropologist Tamara Kohn stated, "we understand each other across time and space through our human capacity to seek connection."<sup>6</sup> By studying the often humble but sometimes extraordinary world of things, it is possible to shed new light on both past societies and ourselves. The more methods provided for this search, the more connections visitors and students will be able to find.

The exhibition title, "The Dead Don't Bury Themselves," emphasized the centrality of death in human experience and the rituals created around it. The objects selected for display and the accompanying information (text panels, object labels, archival documentation, didactic elements, and curator-led floor talks), invited viewers to explore the various facets of our engagement with the Middle East, based on their own interests, whether they be in archaeology, physical anthropology, museum management, politics, conservation, or any other area. This flexibility in content and display ultimately allowed for a collaborative creation of knowledge and experience that is valued by the visitor, rather than a curatorial monologue with no relevance to the visitors' own reality.

## Conclusion

Traditional archaeological museums specializing in the display of objects from the ancient Middle East are currently experiencing an overhaul of their contexts of engagement. The museum's core purpose has not changed; it still strives to give the visitor a learning experience in which they engage with the materials of the past, but the means by which the museum achieves those purposes have been completely reworked (Saumarez Smith 1991:20). Through the influences of technological development and the communication revolution of social media, small research-oriented museums, such as the gallery displaying the Classics and Archaeology Collection at the University of Melbourne, are being forced to find newer and more engaging ways of attracting visitors (Table 15.1). The use of object-based learning offers deep engagement that attracts and interests the

*Table 15.1* Visitor numbers to Classics and Archaeology exhibitions at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne (an asterisk indicates an exhibition used as a case study in this paper)<sup>†</sup>

<i>Dates</i>	<i>Exhibition</i>	<i>Number of Visitors</i>
March 28, 2017 – August 27, 2017	“Syria: Ancient History—Modern Conflict”	16,190
September 27, 2016 – March 19, 2017	“The Dead Don’t Bury Themselves”*	8,759
April 26, 2016 – September 18, 2016	“Images of Life” <sup>‡</sup>	11,559
September 29, 2015 – April 17, 2016	“Mummymania”*	16,841
April 28, 2015 – September 5, 2015	“Souvenirs of the Grand Tour”	15,936
October 25, 2014 – April 19, 2015	“Between Artefact and Text”	15,296
April 16, 2014 – October 12, 2014	“Secret Lives, Forgotten Stories”	13,087
October 23, 2013 – April 6, 2014	“Jericho to Jerusalem”*	9,532
April 4, 2013 – October 13, 2013	“The John Hugh Sutton Collection”	7,450

<sup>†</sup>These visitor numbers include all entering the galleries; this includes museum members, the general public, university staff, undergraduate and postgraduate students, alumni, visiting scholars, and school groups

<sup>‡</sup>This exhibition had no official opening which might account for the lower attendance numbers

visitor. It also has the potential to alleviate a second problem many museums are facing, that of the storage wars and curation crisis, by creating a dynamic and ongoing use for museum collections beyond exhibitions.

The case studies presented here—“Jericho to Jerusalem,” “Mummymania,” and “The Dead Don’t Bury Themselves”—are three examples of exhibitions of Middle Eastern objects at a university museum that were curated to go beyond display, towards more profound interactions with varied museum audiences. The focus on curriculum engagement, public outreach, and interdisciplinary collaboration gives the exhibits a greater relevance, as collections that are immersed in the communities within which they operate. Far from being mere vessels for information communicated by the curator to the visitor, or by the teacher to the learner, the museological strategies applied to the University of Melbourne’s Classics and Archaeology Collection construct a space that inspires co-creation. Curriculum and community engagement through object-based learning engenders a feeling of familiarity that engages the senses, both physical and emotional (Witcomb 2015). This is ultimately what ensures lasting memories of any display, and sparks engagement in its material and subject matter, highlighting the value and benefit that these collections provide.

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## Notes

- 1 Besides these physical displays, the 2,183 objects digitized in the Virtual Museum make the collection accessible online through <http://vm.arts.unimelb.edu.au/classics/>.
- 2 In addition, at the time of writing, three Nimrud ivories and an ancient Iranian fertility figurine from the University of Melbourne's antiquities collection are on display at Tasmania's Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart, as part of the "On the Origin of Art" exhibition (November 5, 2016, to April 17, 2017). Further loans are being considered to Melbourne's Hellenic, Islamic, and Jewish museums.
- 3 Since its development in 2013, the subject has proven popular, not just with archaeology and ancient history students, but with students from a broad range of degree streams, through the Melbourne breadth model (on the Melbourne model, see Times Higher Education 2006).
- 4 While serving as director of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem from 1951 to 1966, Kenyon conducted research (1952–8) at Tell al-Sultan, in Jordan, the site of prehistoric and Old Testament Jericho (Kenyon 1957). From 1961 to 1967, Kenyon turned her attention to excavations at Jerusalem (Kenyon 1974).
- 5 This has now been moved to the OBL Laboratories in Arts West. The object laboratories in the Arts West building are hybrid spaces: teaching, museum display, and open storage.
- 6 "The Dead Don't Bury Themselves" exhibition was opened by Associate Professor Tamara Kohn on Tuesday, October 18, 2016.

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Part V

Commentary



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# 16 Exhibiting ancient Middle Eastern art in America<sup>1</sup>

*Peter Lacovara*

## Introduction

Having worked for many years in museums on the display of ancient Egyptian and Middle Eastern material culture, I have been interested in the history of exhibit design and the social and historical events that have influenced it. In the United States, for Egypt and particularly for the Middle East, the biblical narratives have had a profound impact on public perception of and interest in the great civilizations of the Fertile Crescent. This review attempts a broad overview of the great arc of two centuries of American interest in the ancient world and how events both at home and abroad have shaped how cultural institutions have presented it to a popular audience.

## The ancient Middle East comes to America

The discovery by Sir Austen Henry Layard of the fabulous Assyrian sculptures from Nimrud<sup>2</sup> and their subsequent display at the British Museum in 1847 marks the first great installation of ancient Middle Eastern art in the West (Russell 1997:36; Bohrer 2003). Layard's *Nineveh and Its Remains* was also a bestseller, not just in Britain but in America as well, where it was first published in New York by George P. Putnam in 1849 in a handsome, two-volume set embossed with gilt winged bulls on the covers (Layard 1849). The book and Layard's work was lauded far and wide in the press.

One reviewer noted the art's "strange gigantic majesty, a daringness of conception ... which takes one's breath away to gaze on" (*The Quarterly Review* 1848). In addition to the Assyrian sculptures installed in the British Museum, Layard's work also generated tremendous interest through the reliefs installed in Canford Manor's Nineveh Porch, a scheme developed by Layard's wealthy cousin Lady Charlotte Bertie Guest (Russell 1997:95–127).

The connection of the ancient Assyrians with the Bible excited the interest of American missionaries working in the Middle East (Grant 1841; Dogan and Sharkey 2011; Becker 2015:305) and reliefs presented to them by Layard and by Sir Henry Rawlinson were sent to Yale University, Union College, Bowdoin, Williams College, Middlebury College, the Connecticut Historical Society in

Hartford, the Mercantile Library in St. Louis, the Auburn Theological Seminary in New York, and the Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria (Ross 1976:4–10; Olmstead 1916:20). The display of the reliefs in seminaries was not only educational in recounting biblical history, but also useful as a cautionary tale of a mighty people brought low. In a sermon given in Hanover, Virginia, the Rev. Samuel Davies chided the Virginians for their wayward ways and warned, “what became of this mighty Nineveh at last? Alas! It was turned into a heap of rubbish” (Davies 1845:63).

Meanwhile, the British Museum had found itself with so many relief-decorated slabs from Layard’s work at Nineveh and Nimrud that they decided to sell some off, including twelve slabs to American expatriate Henry Stevens, who purchased the reliefs in 1855 and shipped them to Boston hoping to make a quick return on his investment. Finding no takers there, he eventually sold them to James Lenox for the New York Historical Society (Metropolitan Museum of Art 2000:97–8). In 1937, the society lent them to the Brooklyn Museum, replacing the casts of Assyrian reliefs that had been displayed there previously (Brooklyn Museum 1919). Eventually, the ownership of the reliefs was transferred to the Brooklyn Museum when the dealer-collector Hagop Kevorkian donated the funds to purchase them and install the reliefs in the eponymous Gallery of Ancient Near Eastern Art (Figure 16.1). Boston was eventually able to acquire a relief from Nineveh that had been purchased by a W.T. Shaw on the site and then



*Figure 16.1* Recent installation of Assyrian reliefs in the Hagop Kevorkian Galleries of Ancient Near Eastern Art at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. The installation has not changed much, aside from the wall color and labeling, since the reliefs were first installed

Photograph courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum

passed into the hands of New York antiquities collector G.L. Feuardent in 1880 (Museum of Fine Arts 1888:8).

Similar to the situation that the British Museum found itself in with its wealth of reliefs from Layard's excavations, Robert Koldewey's work at the Ishtar Gate in Babylon from 1902 to 1914 produced so many glazed brick sculptures from the processional way that some were sold off to other institutions, including in America to the Detroit Institute of Arts, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Oriental Institute, the Rhode Island School of Design Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and the Yale University Art Gallery. In some cases, such as in Boston and in Providence, these were the only exemplars of ancient Middle Eastern art and often displayed mounted on gallery walls juxtaposed with Egyptian artifacts. On the opposite end of the scale from the monumental wall decorations of Assyrian palaces and Babylonian temples, cylinder seals were also a much sought-after category of ancient Middle Eastern art. The preeminent collector of these miniature masterpieces was famed financier J.P. Morgan. Interested in writing of all kinds, between 1885 and 1908, and with the help of collector William Hayes Ward, Morgan amassed a collection of over 1,000 seals, tablets, and inscribed objects. In 1909, Morgan offered to fund a professorship in Assyriology for Yale University and funds for the purchase of tablets, seals, and other artifacts which would be the beginnings of the Yale Babylonian Collection. Morgan's contemporary Henry Walters had more eclectic tastes, but his appetite did run to ancient Middle Eastern art, which he displayed in a museum he created in Baltimore (the Walters Art Museum) and which he left to the city after his death in 1931.

While many major and minor American museums had to rely on plaster casts of Assyrian reliefs as their only examples of ancient Middle Eastern art (Figure 16.2)



*Figure 16.2* “Assyrian Relief Representing a Return after a Victory,” a cast at Camden-Carroll Library, Morehead State University. Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art Cast Collection. The British Museum marketed casts of its Assyrian reliefs widely to American institutions in the nineteenth century. As some of the museums retired their casts in favor of original works, they lent or sold them to other Institutions

Photograph courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

(Curran 2016), many museums had decided against exhibiting copies (Beard 1993; Park 2011) and conceived of mounting their own expeditions to discover and bring back the genuine article.

### *Excavation for exhibition*

The University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia was the first to send out a large-scale archaeological expedition to the Middle East beginning in 1888 (see chapter by Pittman, this volume). They began with the site of Nippur. These excavations were the first American archaeological project in the Middle East, and began a long and ongoing tradition of Penn's activities in this part of the world, with research including not only archaeological surveys and excavations, but also ethnographic studies, assembling a collection of nearly 90,000 artifacts from Mesopotamia, Syria-Palestine, the Levant, and Iran (Kuklick 1996:27ff; Hilprecht 1903).

Just as Layard's work had captivated the press, so did the Pennsylvania excavations—often tinged, however, with a rather prejudiced biblical view. “The Heathen Pantheon,” announced the Philadelphia Journal, describing the “remarkable display of objects of idolatrous worship” (Philadelphia Journal 1892). Audiences were encouraged nonetheless. As noted in the Philadelphia Patriot Ledger, “the exhibition is open free to the public every afternoon and all who can should see these curious relics of idolatry” (Philadelphia Patriot Ledger 1892). Still, there was a glimmer of recognition of the significance of the discoveries, as one paper observed, “the announcement of the discovery in Babylonia of an engineering work of 4000 years before Christ is naturally startling to those who have been taught to believe that mankind has inhabited the earth for a period of less than 6000 years” (Philadelphia Ledger 1898).

In addition to work at Nippur from 1888–1900, the Penn Museum would also collaborate in the late 1940s and early 1950s with the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. Most famously, Philadelphia joined the British Museum in the excavations of ancient Ur, directed by Sir Leonard Woolley, from 1922–34.

From this work came the best known artifacts from ancient Mesopotamia in the Royal Cemetery of Ur. The discoveries here made headline news, rivalling the press attention garnered by Howard Carter's unearthing of Tutankhamun's tomb. The “Death Pits of Ur” made for a remarkable story and captivated audiences the world over. The gruesome details were recounted in the San Antonio Texas Light which conjured up an image that “the queen's retinue probably stood or knelt where the ritual placed them until their brains were knocked out” (San Antonio Texas Light 1928). Not everyone dwelt on this macabre scene, however, and Queen Pu'abi was celebrated as “The Flapper Queen” (San Francisco Call 1928). One paper featured a story on the “Hairnets of 3500 B.C. Dug up by Penn Savants in the Holy Land,” which remarked that “the fashions of milady's coiffure were important even [then]” (Philadelphia Record 1927).

Woolley was not above making biblical allusions to court the press, and the discovery of a pair of composite statuettes made of shell, lapis lazuli, gold, and copper depicting goats rampant in trees became the “Ram in the Thicket” of the verse in Genesis 22:13.<sup>3</sup> Wooley was a born raconteur and recounted his discoveries in popular books, magazine articles, and even in broadcasts on early television, to the delight of the museum-going public.

The University of Pennsylvania also pioneered the production of temporary and traveling exhibitions of ancient Middle Eastern material, even to local Philadelphia clothing stores (University of Pennsylvania Museum 1934)! More notable undertakings included an exhibition on the excavations at Beth Shemesh in 1932 and a special exhibition that was held in 1954 in honor of the American-Jewish Tercentenary (1654–1954) (Kramer 1954).

Certainly the greatest popularizer of the ancient Middle East to reach American audiences was James Henry Breasted of the University of Chicago. After completing his studies in Yale and Berlin, Breasted was recruited by the famed founder and first president of the University, William Rainey Harper, to join a stellar faculty he was recruiting and later also as director of the school’s Haskell Oriental Museum. Breasted had even greater aspirations, however, and created a center for the study of the ancient world, the Oriental Institute, with the financial support of John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

Breasted then planned an exploratory trip through a Middle East freed from the clutches of the Ottoman Empire and perhaps more open to foreign archaeological research. He hoped not only to purchase antiquities for the new Oriental Institute Museum but also to prospect for prime sites for excavation. He invited a cadre of his students to accompany him, including William Arthur Shelton, who had been appointed a professor of Semitic languages at Emory University in Atlanta and was using the opportunity to build a collection for his own university. Shelton observed that, as Americans, they were greeted warmly wherever they went (Shelton 1922). After landing in Alexandria harbor in November 1919, the troop wound their way from Egypt to Bombay and then on to Basra and through Mesopotamia and Syria, arriving at Beirut in June 1920. They returned to the States via Jerusalem, Haifa, Cairo, and London that summer. The expedition itself would later form the subject of an engaging exhibit at the Oriental Institute in 2010, “Pioneers to the Past” (Emberling 2010).

The Oriental Institute was a teaching and research institution as well as a museum, and through its expeditions throughout the Middle East from the 1920s to the 1940s, it garnered a collection of the art and archaeology of the ancient Middle East without rival. With its purpose-built building, located in the heart of the campus, the Oriental Institute Museum opened its doors to the public in 1931. The jewel in the crown of the display was a series of reliefs, including a winged bull or *lamassu* sculpture, from the University’s excavations at Khorsabad from 1928–35.

While the bulk of Assyrian reliefs exported from Iraq in the 19th century had gone to the British Museum in London, the Louvre in Paris, and the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin, some fragments and individual slabs



had been given by the excavators to missionaries and to schools or universities. William Frederic Williams, a missionary in Iraq and former Yale faculty member, with the aid of another Yale, Henry Lobel, were able to acquire six slabs from Ashurnasirpal's palace, which were divided up between Yale, Amherst College, and Union Theological Seminary in Utica, New York.<sup>4</sup>

A number of other Assyrian reliefs excavated by Layard and his contemporaries were subsequently deaccessioned by their original owners and sold to other museums directly or offered up on the antiquities market. Five of these were purchased by Raymond Pitcairn in the 1920s for the Glencairn Museum in Pennsylvania. The collection included two winged genies or *apkallus*, which came from the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud (Markoe 1983).

The reliefs that had been installed at Canford Manor were put up for sale to cover inheritance taxes owed by Lady Charlotte's grandson. Most were eventually purchased in 1920 by the art dealer Dikran Kelekian, who set about marketing them to likely American institutions, including the Oriental Institute, which balked at the price of nearly half a million dollars. Kelekian then tried Philadelphia, Boston, Detroit, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art. It was beyond Boston's means and they had two Assyrian reliefs in their small collection already. Having tried to market them for about four years, Kelekian accepted an offer from the University of Pennsylvania Museum to display them and pay for the shipping costs in hopes of raising the funds to purchase them. Although Penn had assembled one of the world's greatest ancient Middle Eastern collections through their excavations, they only had one Assyrian relief, a gift engineered by journalist Dr. Talcott Williams in 1891, and Museum Director George Byron Gordon was keen to add the Canford reliefs to the museum's holdings. Unfortunately for Penn, Gordon passed away on January 31, 1927. Kelekian was about to give up and ship the reliefs back to Europe where he hoped he would have better luck when John D. Rockefeller, Jr., stepped in, purchasing them and eventually donating them to The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Holloway 2004). As in many museums, these objects were placed under the supervision of the Department of Egyptian Art, but were displayed separately from their galleries at the south end of the Great Hall, where they were exhibited as a foundational branch on the family tree of art and culture (Rakic 2017:320). They were later moved to new galleries with the formation of a separate Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art in 1956 (Aruz et. al. 2010).

The Second World War and the upheavals its aftermath led to in the Middle East largely brought an end to the great museum-sponsored expeditions of the 1920s and 1930s. One excavation partially sponsored by The Metropolitan Museum of Art was a British School of Archaeology expedition in Iraq led by Max Mallowan, who had resumed excavations at Nimrud in 1949, nearly a century after Layard had last worked at the site. Digging in the Northwest Palace, Mallowan found a huge cache of exquisitely carved ivory inlays. Many had been found at the bottom of well shafts within the palace grounds. Luckily, Mallowan's wife, the famed detective novelist Agatha Christie, understood the situation, and as her husband noted, "for the preservation of the objects and their treatment in

the field, Agatha's controlled imagination came to our aid. She instantly realized that objects which had been under water for 2000 years had to be nursed back into a new and relatively arid climate ... therefore [she] kept [them] under damp towels for several weeks and we reduced the humidity day by day" (Trümpler 1999:152). Well over 1,000 complete inlays and many fragments came from the work, and the British School gave a share to The Metropolitan Museum in exchange for their support, as well as selling some to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the British Museum.

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art was fortunate to acquire five Assyrian reliefs from Nimrud that had originally been given to the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle upon Tyne by the excavators (Stead 1968). The Museum was further enriched by the gift of a collection of Mesopotamian objects collected by Hollywood agent Phil Berg in 1969 and the acquisition of the Nasli M. Heeramaneck Collection of Ancient Near Eastern, Central Asiatic Art in 1976 (Mousavi 2012). Numbering over 2000 objects the collection is currently in process of being redisplayed along with much of the holdings of the Museum (<http://www.lacma.org/art/collection/art-ancient-near-east>).

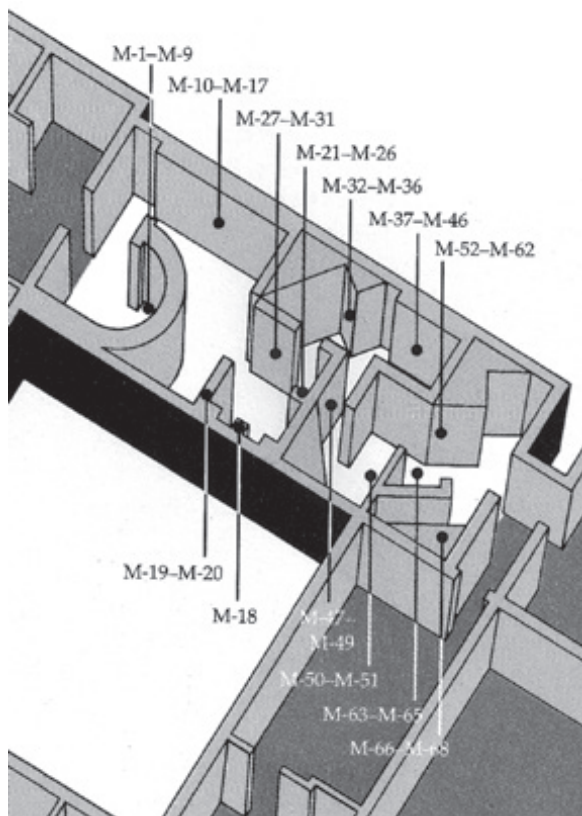
Many museums had also turned to purchasing objects on the art market rather than excavation as their main source of acquiring ancient Middle Eastern art, but such endeavors would entail not only ethical problems, but also open the door to a parade of rather embarrassing forgeries (Muscarella 2000). Museums had to rely more than ever on the expert eyes of curators to help avoid the pitfalls of brining such dogs into the manger. Without doubt, the greatest of these was Edith Porada, whose keen eye and incisive mind transformed the study of cylinder seals into a cornerstone of ancient Middle Eastern art history (Pittman 1995). Besides teaching at Columbia University and training a generation of new curators, she also served as curator of the Morgan Library's renowned seal collection, as well as studying and publishing seals in American collections (Porada 1947, 1948).

Politics would play a part in a traveling exhibition the Shah of Iran sent to the United States, titled "7000 Years of Iranian Art" (Porada and Ettinghausen 1964), which toured the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art, Kansas City, Missouri; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; the Cleveland Museum of Art; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, after opening at the National Gallery in Washington, DC, where the show was opened by the Shah and the Empress Farah, using the celebrations to further strengthen ties to the US Government which had helped him return to the peacock throne.

## **Reinstallation and reassessment**

While American archaeologists had returned to the Middle East to excavate in the postwar years, restrictions or the total elimination of divisions given to the expeditions curtailed the large-scale acquisitions of material that museums had been used to, and many turned inward to assess the collections they had already amassed.

A new generation of anthropologically minded archaeologists began to enter the field in the latter half of the twentieth century. In the mid-1970s Judith A. Franke, Associate Curator at the Oriental Institute Museum, conceived of a new display for the Mesopotamian Gallery that would focus on what the art and archaeology told us about ancient society. She would team up with designer Frank Madsen to envisage a bold new design for the old installation (Figure 16.3).



*Figure 16.3* Plan of Franke-Madsen Mesopotamian Gallery at the Oriental Institute. Guide to the Oriental Institute Museum (1982:71). The gallery was installed with dramatic flair, with turns that would reveal different aspects of ancient Mesopotamian culture including: M 1–9 An overview of the History and Cultural Development of Mesopotamia, M 10–17 Religious and Secular Public Buildings, M 18–31 Collection Highlights including Early Dynastic Sculpture, Steatite and Chlorite vessels, and later sculpture, M 32–36, Writing from tokens to tablets, including historical, economic, mathematical, medical, and astronomical texts, M 37–48, Seals, M 47–51 Religion, covering gods and mythology, as well as temple and cults, M 52–57 Crafts such as metalwork and stonework combining archaeological materials and ethnographic photography, M 58 Subsistence, covering agriculture, fishing, and animal husbandry, M 59–62 Trade, Travel and Economy, M 63–68 Daily Life, including sections on houses, dress and adornment, and games and gaming

Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago

Funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, the project sought to showcase the peerless collections of the Oriental Institute in a new and accessible way. Combining both chronological and thematic displays, the new installation sought to break up the rather dull, compartmentalized approach that traditionally had been the standard in the Oriental Institute Museum. They also aimed to make the new gallery more understandable to non-specialist visitors, and rather than rely simply on type site names for the various eras of Mesopotamian civilization, they would label them in more engaging terms. “The Long Beginning” presented the Prehistoric and Early Dynastic cultures, followed by the “Great Empire” to discuss the rise of the Akkadians, and the “Return to Temple Tradition” to describe the Old Babylonian period, and so forth. There were also displays that focused on daily life, the economy, trade and travel, crafts, iconography, warfare, and the temple—“topics which would best reflect the collection in the most coherent and effective manner possible” (Franke 1973) (Figures 16.4 and 16.5).

The new gallery opened on June 9, 1977, and was heralded as a “display unique in the United States because of the variety of the materials displayed and the knowledge of their archaeological provenance” (University of Chicago 1977). Unfortunately, a change in leadership in the museum ushered in a less visionary approach and the new galleries were dismantled in the early 1980s and replaced with an installation like the traditional one, which itself was to be entirely changed beginning in the 1990s. The team of Franke and Madsen,



Figure 16.4 Photograph of “The Building of a Temple” case in the Franke-Madsen Mesopotamian Gallery at the Oriental Institute

Author’s collection

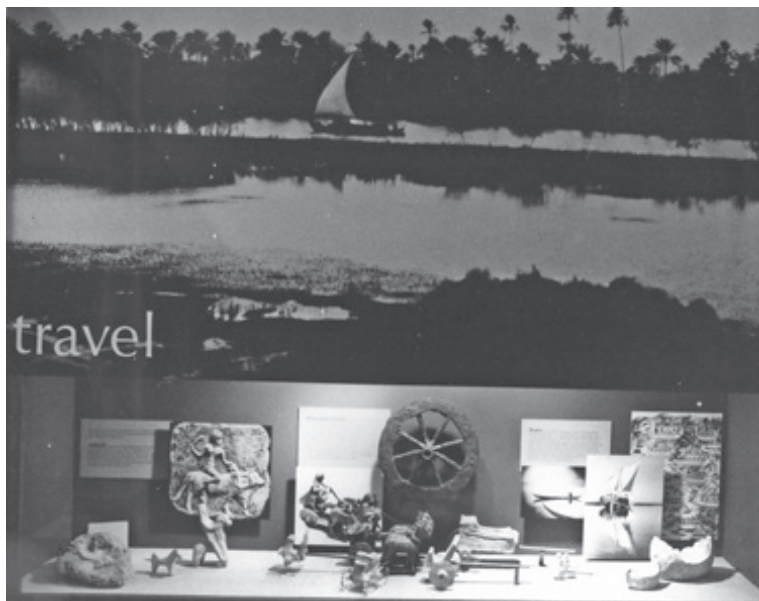


Figure 16.5 Photograph of the “Travel” case in the Franke-Madsen Mesopotamian Gallery at the Oriental Institute

Author's collection

however, went on to create other original installations at the Ocmulgee National Monument and the Dixon Mounds State Museum.

Also at this time, greater concern was being placed on looting of sites and the role that the market in antiquities might play in it. The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology was the first institution to take a public stand against the antiquities market. In 1970, the museum issued what would come to be known as the “Pennsylvania Declaration,” which pledged that it would not purchase any object that did not have a legitimate pedigree that conformed to the export laws of the country of origin. This would later that same year inspire the famed UNESCO Convention, which sought to prohibit the illicit trade in cultural property (Pezzati 2010).

Although restrictions were advised on the purchase of material that appeared on the art market after the year 1970, as set by the Convention, excavated objects were still obtainable for museums from archaeological excavations in Israel and the Museum at Emory University added to Shelton's collection through sponsorship of excavations at Jericho and Jerusalem by Dame Kathleen Kenyon and the first underwater exploration by the Link Expedition at Caesaria (Ben-Dor 1961). In the 1980s, the collection—which had been housed in the Law School basement with stuffed birds, the oldest Maytag washing machine in Atlanta, and a mandarin's fingernail picked up by a missionary—was discovered by Dr. Monique

Brouillet Seefried, who was able to convince the university's president, James T. Laney, and philanthropist Michael C. Carlos to create a new museum designed by architect Michael Graves and christened the Emory Museum of Art and Archaeology, later renamed in honor of Mr. Carlos (Carlos Museum 2011). One feature of the design, having maps outlined on the floor of the galleries, was adopted by Jung Brannen Associates, Inc., in their evocative re-design of the ancient Middle Eastern installation at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Figure 16.6).

At The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the ancient Middle Eastern collection had been overseen by the Department of Egyptian Art until 1932, when a Department of Near Eastern Art was established that covered both the ancient and Islamic periods. Eventually, that Department was separated into an Islamic Art Department and the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art in 1956. The collection was built through gifts, purchases, and by excavations participated in or supported by the museum, which included work at Ctesiphon, Nimrud, Nippur, Hasanlu, Qasr-i Abu Nasr, Tell ad-Duweir, Tell Brak, Tell Mozan, and Umm el-Marra. The Galleries were re-installed in 1981, with the support of Raymond and Beverly Sackler. Curator Joan Aruz embarked on a series of extraordinarily ambitious and comprehensive exhibitions exploring interconnections between the Middle East and the larger ancient world: "The Art of the First Cities: The Third Millennium BC from the Mediterranean to the Indus" (2003); "Beyond Babylon: Art, Trade, and Diplomacy in the Second Millennium BC" (2008); and "Assyria to Iberia at the Dawn of the Classical Age" (2014), all of which were accompanied by lavishly illustrated catalogs (see chapter by Aruz and Rakic, this volume).



*Figure 16.6* Photograph of the Ancient Near Eastern Art Gallery in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The collection of ancient Middle Eastern art in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts is rather small in comparison to The Metropolitan, Brooklyn, and University of Pennsylvania Museums, and not as comprehensive, but it does have some large and impressive pieces, and so Joe Mamayek for Jung Brannen Associates, Inc., designed a space incorporating ancient design elements to contextualize the objects in a visually stunning presentation

Photograph courtesy of Joe Mamayek



Meanwhile, at the J.P. Morgan Library, Sidney Babcock, who had succeeded Edith Porada as curator, masterminded a series of smaller but no less remarkable exhibitions beginning with “A Seal Upon Thine Heart: Glyptic Art of the Ancient Near East, ca. 3500–2100 BC” in 1998 (Eisenberg 1998) and followed by “Founding Figures: Copper Sculpture from Ancient Mesopotamia ca. 3300–2000 BC” in 2016 (<http://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/founding-figures>) (Figure 16.7) and “Noah’s Beasts: Sculpted Animals from Ancient Mesopotamia” in 2017 (<http://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/noahs-beasts>) (Figure 16.8), each a tour de force in the marriage of object selection and design to tell a captivating narrative of the symbolism and meaning behind the aesthetic beauty of the objects. Likewise, the reinstallation of the permanent seal collection in the North Room of the Library showcases some of the finest seals to their greatest advantage in a setting that meshes perfectly with the historic character of the building (Figure 16.9).

At the Oriental Institute, a major renovation of the Museum was undertaken at the turn of the millennium, which included the construction of climate-controlled housing for the storage collections and archives as well as a re-installation of the Khorsabad reliefs around the winged bull which had arrived as the new museum was being built in 1929–30 and brought in through an open end wall into what would become the Egyptian Galleries. The new installation in the



*Figure 16.7* Photograph of the “Founding Figures Display” in the J.P. Morgan Library. In the exhibition “Founding Figures: Copper Sculpture from Ancient Mesopotamia, ca. 3300–2000 BC” in the J.P. Morgan Library, a collection of foundation figures from early Mesopotamian temples was gathered together, along with related seals and objects, and set in a brown painted gallery with a sepia backdrop of a ziggurat to envelop the visitor in a sense of purpose and place

Photograph courtesy of the J.P. Morgan Library



Figure 16.8 Photograph of the “Noah’s Beasts” exhibit in the J.P. Morgan Library. This exhibition presented a range of Sumerian animal sculptures along with the Morgan’s “Deluge Story” tablet as well as cylinder seals to illustrate the role of animals, both wild and domestic, in Mesopotamian mythology

Photograph courtesy of the J.P. Morgan Library

Yelda Khorsabad Court Gallery allowed all of the Mesopotamian collection to finally be viewed as a whole.

In 2006, the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World (ISAW) was founded at New York University, thanks to the generosity and guidance of Shelby White and Leon Levy. They created a version of Breasted’s Oriental Institute that would also encompass the study of antiquity across the globe. While ISAW is a venue for research and education, and does not collect, it does have facilities for exhibitions and has presented a wide range of temporary exhibits from far-flung sources. One innovative presentation, “From Ancient to Modern: Archaeology and Aesthetics” (Chi and Azara 2015) presented on February 12, 2015, to June 7, 2015, juxtaposed Mesopotamian objects with renderings both in archaeological documentation and its influence on contemporary art and artists.

The University of Pennsylvania Museum mounted a traveling exhibit of the “Treasures of the Royal Tombs of Ur” with a comprehensive catalog (Zettler and Horne 1998). Traveling to 13 venues across the United States, including the Frank H. McClung Museum of the University of Tennessee, the Dallas Museum of Art, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington, DC, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the J. Pierpont Morgan Library, the Oriental Institute Museum, the Detroit Institute of Art, and the Michael C. Carlos Museum, it was wildly popular, attracting additional attention with the unfortunate coincidence of the Iraq invasion.





*Figure 16.9* Photograph of the cylinder seal installation in the J.P. Morgan Library. In the recent restoration of the original McKim building of the J.P. Morgan Library, the North Room was converted into a gallery of antiquities, featuring the ancient Middle Eastern seal and tablet collection. Most of the 1906 original interior was retained and, with the addition of modern fiber-optic lighting, some of the Library's great masterpieces, such as the Akkadian landscape seal shown in this case, were exhibited to their best advantage

Photograph courtesy of the J.P. Morgan Library

Political upheaval and conflict had a devastating impact on museums and archaeological sites throughout the Middle East at the turn of the 21st century (<https://www.headstuff.org/history/cultural-heritage-peril-ancient-victims-modern-war-middle-east/>), and many American museums and curators offered assistance. In October 2015, The Metropolitan Museum hosted a conference in Istanbul with Columbia University and Koç University to open a dialogue about cultural heritage preservation in Syria and Iraq. The Penn Cultural Heritage Center was founded to create public awareness of issues related to the preservation of cultural heritage and museum collections through the Council of American Overseas Research Centers, to bring 22 Iraqi museum staff to the Smithsonian Institution for training courses. In 2004, the US State Department sponsored a five-week course in museum management, conservation, and curatorial practices, and in 2009–10, the Department's Iraq Cultural Heritage Project provided training to museum professionals from throughout Iraq at the Field Museum

of Natural History in Chicago. A team of conservators from the Walters Art Museum, in partnership with the University of Delaware and the Iraqi Institute for the Conservation of Antiquities and Heritage, along with the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Arizona, Winterthur Museum, the Walters Art Museum, and the Getty Conservation Institute, undertook a conservation training program to help with the restoration of sites and objects damaged in the fighting, including many of the famous Nimrud ivories (Walters Art Museum Members Magazine 2012). Many other museums and scholarly institutions, both in the United States and abroad, are working to help save this precious legacy.

While many institutions had by the early years of the twentieth century taken down and stored or even discarded their plaster casts, the casts gained new attention in the light of the depredations of the terrorist organization known as ISIS. A new appreciation of these plaster cast collections has taken hold and they are now again being considered valuable documents worthy of study and display (Walsh 2015).

Despite the often dire news coming from the war-torn region, public interest in the art and archaeology of the ancient civilizations of the Middle East has only increased, and a survey of some of the greatest works of art from them was organized by John Olbrantz and Trudy Kawami in “Breath of Heaven, Breath of Earth: Ancient Near Eastern Art from American Collections” for the Hallie Ford Museum of Art (Kawami and Olbrantz 2013); as the local paper reported, “Almost anything that is really old is really interesting. Art that is really old—and by ‘really old,’ we are talking about thousands of years—is downright fascinating” (Keefer 2013).

At the intersection of religion and politics, near the national Mall in Washington, DC, is a museum being created by controversial Hobby Lobby president Steve Green. Although interest in the Bible and ancient Middle Eastern art and archaeology have been inextricably linked since the first Assyrian reliefs landed on American shores, and politics has often played a role in exhibitions of this material, the proposed institution raises many questions about acquisition policy and interpretation (Taylor 2017). As we have seen, these issues are not new to the field and if one thing is certain, the discussion is sure to continue.

## Notes

- 1 While there are many Museums and Universities in the United States with collections of ancient Middle Eastern art, in this brief survey I have had to concentrate only on some of the largest and most well-known. For their help and assistance, I would very much like to thank Sidney Babcock, Kim Benzel, Lawrence Berman, Kathryn Blanchard, Geoff Emberling, Alexandra Erichson, Jean Evans, Anne Flannery, Rita Freed, Katie Getchell, Kaitlyn Krieg, Helen McDonald, Joe Mamayek, Alessandro Pezzati, Emily Teeter, Yelena Rakic, and Richard Zettler.
- 2 Wrongly identified by Layard at first as Nineveh.
- 3 King James Bible: “And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son” (Genesis 22:13).

- 4 A list of American Institutions with Assyrian reliefs would include: The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois; Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine; Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York; Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio; Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia; De Young Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, San Francisco, California; Detroit Institute of the Arts, Detroit, Michigan; Fleming Museum, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont; Fogg Museum, Harvard Art Museums, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Glencairn Museum, Academy of the New Church, Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania; Harvard Semitic Museum, Harvard University, Boston, Massachusetts; Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire; Kalamazoo Valley Museum, Kalamazoo, Michigan; Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California; Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts; Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester, Rochester, New York; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York; Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia; Middlebury College Museum of Art, Middlebury College, Middlebury, Vermont; Minneapolis Institute of the Arts, Minneapolis, Minnesota; Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, Massachusetts; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Boston, Massachusetts; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Houston, Texas; The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri; The Oriental Institute Museum, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois; The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, New Jersey; Saint Louis Art Museum, Saint Louis, Missouri; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia; Virginia Theological Seminary, Alexandria, Virginia; Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut; The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland; Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts; Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut.

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